Cites & Insights

Crawford at Large/Online Edition

Libraries • Policy • Technology • Media

Volume 12, Number 2: March 2012 ISSN 1534-0937

The Front

Reinvention—of a Sort

The *Cites & Insights* hiatus announced November 28, 2011, technically ended January 20, 2012, when *Cites & Insights* 12:1 (January-February 2012) appeared. By then, I was through with my landmark investigation into public library presence on social networks and almost through preparing the initial results (the book based on that survey, *Successful Social Networking in Public Libraries,* is already listed in ALA Editions' catalog and available for preorder, although it's just entered the editing stages and won't be available for several months). My other 2012 book, *The Librarian's Guide to Micropublishing*, was not only finished, it was actually for sale (in paperback, ebook form and, from Lulu, in a first-rate hardcover edition). While I take a break before working on future book ideas, I find that I want to continue *C&I*—at least for a while.

Inside This Issue

I'm still lacking sponsorship, and that's an issue: It's tempting to turn all creative energies toward things that *do* return some revenue, given our household's general lack of earned income. I'm still wondering whether *C&I*'s effectiveness and influence have both faded away. I've had recent indications from a couple of unexpected sources that some library guy named Walt Crawford has had valuable things to day—but I wonder whether that guy was expected to disappear quietly into retirement some time ago. I *really* want to find funding for ongoing larger public library social network surveys and analysis, although without institutional affiliation I'm not sure how to proceed on that (suggestions and help welcome!). I've even indicated a willingness to sweeten the pot: If I had ongoing funding for "this stuff"—research and C&I combined—at an appropriate level, I'd change the C&I license, including all back issues,

to BY (any use legal as long as attribution is provided) and I'd dedicate my pre-ALA Editions (I was going to say "pre-1992," but my last G.K. Hall book came out in 1992) to the public domain.

Lack of funding for various ventures may influence what appears here. For example, there's one story I'm starting to work on—and I'm wondering whether it's salable to *American Libraries* or *Library Journal* in shortened, incomplete form, as opposed to being given away here in complete form. Meanwhile, it felt appropriate to refresh *Cites & Insights*.

I put up a SurveyMonkey survey for *Cites & Insights* readers but also did some thinking on my own. Based on survey results, I've done *another* survey specifically aimed at people who read the PDF version of *Cites & Insights* but do so online or on e-devices. Based on *those* results…well, see the last section of this essay.

First, the initial survey results, with text largely identical to a long post on *Walt at Random*.

The Survey

Thanks again to the 39 people who responded to the first formal survey of *Cites & Insights* readers.

I have no real idea how many people actually read *Cites & Insights* on a semi-regular basis. Through February 29, 2011, only 406 have so far downloaded the first 2012 issue, so 39 could be almost 10% of the regular readership—but at the end of last year, every issue had been downloaded at least 635 times (not including the hiatus 2-pager), and all but one had been downloaded at least 727 times, so I'm inclined to think that 39 is about 5% of the core readership. At least I hope I still have 720+ core readers!

So what did I conclude from the results? Here's a tabular dump of the complete results, followed by some notes.

How read?	Print PDF	HTML	Onl. PDF	Varies	Total	
	11	3	16	9	39	
Sections read, enjoyed	Always	Usually	Some	Never		AU %
Bibs & Blather: R	19	15	5	0	39	87%
B&B: E	14	21	2	0	37	90%
My Back Pages: R	10	14	13	1	38	62%
MBP: E	6	22	8	1	37	72%
Offtopic: E	12	14	13	0	39	67%
Offtop :E	6	23	6	1	36	74%
MiW: R	15	14	7	1	37	74%
MiW: E	12	16	6	0	34	72%
TQT: R	19	16	3	1	39	90%
TQT: E	18	16	2	0	36	87%
Language-related: R	18	13	7	0	38	79%

Language: E	14	17	7	0	38	79%
Blogging & social networks:	20	12	5	0	37	82%
Blog: E	19	12	7	0	38	79%
Policy-related: R	14	18	7	0	39	82%
Policy: E	14	19	5	0	38	85%

How You Read It

The second row is the responses to the first question: how do you read *Cites & Insights*?

To me, the most significant figure is the "3" for HTML. If that figure had been a lot higher, I might work a little more on the Word template I use for HTML versions of essays. Given that it's only one-thirteenth of responses, it would be tempting to say "ah, the heck with it, who needs HTML?"—but even in 2012 so far, several essays have been viewed more than 200 times, and from the time I started doing them through 12/31/11, 369 of the essays had been viewed at least 1,000 times, with 227 viewed at least 2,000 times and 40 viewed at least 5,000 times—all in addition to issue views. So I'll keep doing HTML, but I don't plan to spend time making it prettier than it is.

Category Readership and Enjoyment

I've abbreviated the questions. The first row of each pair is for readership [R], the second for enjoyment [E]. Abbreviations that aren't obvious:

- Offtopic = Offtopic Perspectives, my old-movie mini-reviews.
- MiW = Making it Work, essays on librarianship.
- TQT = Trends & Quick Takes.

If you're looking at my Diigo tag lists, I use the latter two abbreviations there as well (for now), although MiW has lots of subtopics (e.g. miw-balance).

The rightmost column, "AU%," is the percentage of all respondents that answered "Always" or "Usually" for this question. Note "*all* respondents": The divisor is always 39, even for Making it Work, where only 34 people responded to the "Enjoy?" question. I'm offering the most negative interpretation of the answers by using this larger divisor.

What I see, then, is that every one of these sections except My Back Pages is usually read by at least 2/3 of you (and MBP isn't that far off); that—to my surprise—Making it Work is the least commonly-read of the serious sections (whatever Offtopic Perspectives may be, "serious" isn't the right descriptor); and that most sections are read by most readers.

As for whether you enjoy the sections, I'm gratified that no section scored lower than 72% "always" or "usually" enjoyed. It's interesting that My Back Pages and Making it Work are tied for lowest percentage here.

I'm not terribly surprised that, for "always enjoyed," you're a serious bunch: Offtopic Perspectives and My Back Pages are tied for last, with

only six enthusiastic responses each—and most *serious* sections are clustered fairly closely near the top.

What will I do with those results? Not a whole lot, because they don't suggest clear futures. I could downplay Making it Work, and that may happen as I'm not focusing on academic libraries—but I'm not likely to downplay language-related areas or policy any more than I already have.

I could put this another way, given plans I'd already started formulating. To wit:

All Those Sections Are Gone—Except The CD-ROM Project
That's right. BIBS & BLATHER, MY BACK PAGES, TRENDS & QUICK TAKES, MAKING IT WORK, OFFTOPIC PERSPECTIVE, THE ZEITGEIST (which I didn't even bother to ask about), INTERESTING & PECULIAR PRODUCTS, COPYRIGHT CURRENTS & COMMENTS, LIBRARY ACCESS TO SCHOLARSHIP, OLD MEDIA/NEW MEDIA, even PERSPECTIVE itself: All gone. Kaput. Finit. Which leads us to…

New Sections

Some of the old section names never did work very well—MAKING IT WORK, for example, never clearly conveyed what "it" was. Others became less relevant over time. I looked at other magazines (I think of C&I as a web-distribued magazine more than anything else, although it's singularly lacking in ads, clean page breaks and illustrations). I looked at some of the thousands of source items I've flagged for discussion. I looked at the banner itself.

The sections that follow are the current result of all that looking and the generally ambiguous results of the survey. This is all slightly in flux: New section names may emerge, some of these sections may never have content… For each section, I'll note the old section or sections that might appear here and what might be covered. For now, there won't be a direct replacement for PERSPECTIVE; other section labels should handle both long (even full-issue) essays and shorter items and collections.

The Front
You're reading it. Stuff about *Cites & Insights*, my books and the like. Primarily what used to be BIBS & BLATHER, my alternate name for *Cites & Insights*. When this section appears, it will almost always appear at…the front.

The Back
Snarky odds and ends, more snarky and even odder than the rest of *Cites & Insights*. What used to be MY BACK PAGES, plus most of the "peculiar" from

what used to be INTERESTING & PECULIAR PRODUCTS and maybe some other stuff. When this section appears, it will appear at (wait for it) the back.

The Middle
Shorter pieces and pieces that don't fit neatly anywhere else. This is likely to be one of the longest sections for a while, until I catch up with items tagged "TQT." Which is an indication of what this is: What used to be TRENDS & QUICK TAKES, a name that had long since outgrown the "trend-oriented" label. When this section appears…oh, never mind.

And that's it. Well, it could be (and in this issue almost is), but that would be silly even by my standards. Instead, there are four more sections based directly on the banner—and, for now, three more that I feel are needed.

Libraries
Essays and collections of shorter items that relate primarily to libraries, library operations, library philosophy and the like. What used to be MAKING IT WORK.

Policy
Essays and collections of shorter items that relate primarily to issues of law and policy, including copyright, censorship (if I ever return to that), open access and the like. Replaces COPYRIGHT CURRENTS and COMMENTS, LIBRARY ACCESS TO SCHOLARSHIP and more.

Technology
Essays and collections of shorter items that relate primarily to technology. Replaces INTERESTING & PECULIAR PRODUCTS but also portions of what used to be in TRENDS & QUICK TAKES. One odd consequence: Much as I love ampersands, there will be a lot fewer of them.

Media
Essays and collections of shorter items that relate primarily to media, both physical and net-based. Replaces OFFTOPIC PERSPECTIVES (old movie reviews aren't going away), OLD MEDIA/NEW MEDIA, aspects of NET MEDIA and more. But see below…

And these three sections for ongoing foci that don't fit very well into the sections above:

Social Networks
Essays and collections of shorter items that relate primarily to social networks. Note that I say "social networks," not "social media"—so essays about blogging don't belong here.

Words
Essays and collections of shorter items that relate primarily to words—reading, writing, publishing, ebooks, blogging. This replaces WRITING ABOUT READING, THINKING ABOUT BLOGGING and more. It may turn out to be too ungainly. It might not.

Intersections
Essays and collections of shorter items that appear to be directly at the intersection of one of the four primary areas (libraries, policy, technology and media). In some ways, the intersections are what *Cites & Insights* is all about. This section name may never get used (maybe THE MIDDLE will handle it all); we shall see.

Layout and Typography

I've been tweaking layout and typography throughout the last 11 years. There were two changes within Volume 11—and when I noted that there *were* changes but not *what* they were, either nobody noticed or nobody cared enough to identify the changes.

For the record, the first change was to activate vertical justification in the June/July 2011 issue—with the oddity that Microsoft Word apparently doesn't apply vertical justification to the first page, at least not for a two-column layout. But the bottom of each column for the rest of that and more recent issues has ended at exactly the same point (I add blank paragraphs after the Masthead, since Word *does* attempt to vertically justify the final page and that can yield truly bizarre results.)

The second change, in August 2011, was kind of a reversion—but not really. After using Constantia as a body typeface throughout 2010 and for much of 2011, I switched back to an old favorite, a typeface created specifically for my alma mater and the only one I've ever purchased directly: Berkeley Oldstyle. But it's not *really* a reversion because I had been using Berkeley Oldstyle Book (except for boldface, since there's no bold version of Book), which is lighter than Berkeley itself. I'm now using Berkeley itself; Berkeley Book was a little *too* light for this purpose, although it's great for books. (I finally found that Constantia was a little heavier than I wanted.)

Time for a change? I tried out every complete serif text typeface I own—something like 15 of them—using the same page of *C&I* and the same 11-on-13 (with indented quotes 10-on-12) I've been using. Several of the resulting pages were quite good. They varied widely in space requirements, which was no surprise, and if I'd chosen Palatino Linotype I might have changed to 11-on-14 or 10-on-13 (because Palatino "sets large," having larger letters at a given type size than most typefaces).

In the end, after hours of comparisons, I decided to stick with Berkeley Oldstyle. Here's what ITC has to say about the typeface—and apparently it isn't *precisely* my alma mater's typeface.

> In 1937, a friend of Frederic Goudy's asked the noted designer if he would draw a face for the exclusive use of the University of California Press at Berkeley. Goudy accepted the task gladly.
>
> A little over a year later Goudy had produced the foundation for the new type family. He was pleased with his work; in fact, Goudy considered The University of California Old Style fonts to be among his favorite designs. Unfortunately for the graphic design community, the fonts remained the property of the university press and saw little use elsewhere.
>
> In the early 1980s, ITC planned a revival of Goudy's California Old Style design. Aaron Burns, then president of the company, called Tony Stan and asked him if he would be willing to take on the project. Stan was a world-class type designer who knew a great design project when he saw it. He was delighted at the opportunity, and work on ITC Berkeley Oldstyle commenced (the name was chosen to pay tribute to the revival's inspiration). Stan completed the design in 1983.
>
> Many Hints of Goudy
>
> ITC Berkeley Oldstyle offers the flavor and dynamics of Goudy's original University of California Old Style without being a slavish copy. In fact, a close look reveals hints of several other Goudy designs in play: Kennerly, Goudy Oldstyle, Deepdene, and even a touch of Booklet Oldstyle.
>
> ITC Berkeley Oldstyle is characterized by its calligraphic weight stress, smooth weight transitions, classic x-height and ample ascenders and descenders. These traits work together to create high levels of character legibility and a text color that is light and inviting.

Frankly, if it had better kerning, I'd be tempted to use Californian FB. Here's a paragraph in Berkeley Oldstyle followed by the same paragraph in Californian FB:

Berkeley Oldstyle

Some of the old section names never did work very well—MAKING IT WORK, for example, never really conveyed what "it" was. Others became less relevant over time. I looked at other magazines (I really think of C&I as an electronic magazine more than anything else, although it's singularly lacking in ads, clean page breaks and illustrations). I looked at some of the thousands of source items I've flagged for discussion. I looked at the banner itself. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog and looks for Various AV Tests of Well-done Kerning.

Californian FB

Some of the old section names never did work very well—MAKING IT WORK, for example, never really conveyed what "it" was. Others became less relevant over time. I looked at other magazines (I really think of C&I as an electronic magazine more than anything else, although it's singularly lacking in ads, clean page breaks and illustrations). I looked at some of the thousands of source items I've flagged for discussion. I looked at the banner itself. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog and looks for Various AV Tests of Well-done Kerning.

Comments

Actually, "if it had *any* kerning" may be more apropos. While Californian has nice aspects, the apparent total lack of kerning ruins it for me. So Berkeley Oldstyle it is… Looking at the ITC info on this typeface, I see there's now a "Pro" version—OpenType designs that include the option of non-lining numbers (one of my favorite aspects of Constantia) and probably even better typographic flexibility (true small caps?). Unfortunately, it's also $259 for the complete family or about $100 for the minimum set I'd need, and given the near-$0 revenue from *Cites & Insights*, that's not going to happen.

Layout changes? None at the moment, at least for the canonical *Cites & Insights*, except that I'll remember to activate bookmarks in the PDFs from now on, so that you can open a navigation pane in Reader to go directly to article names or sections.

The Online PDF Alternative

I did a second survey for those who said they read *Cites & Insights* in PDF form but online (that is, not printed out). Here's a lightly edited version of the post announcing the results of that survey.

According to Urchin stats, 98 people viewed the post announcing the survey. The first attempt at an online-oriented PDF was downloaded 17 times. Five people responded to the survey.

The Results

"How do you feel about the Online PDF as compared to the regular C&I PDF?"

- Comparative readability online or on your preferred device: One response was "less readable," one was "about the same," two were "more readable" and one was "much more readable." I take that as a mild endorsement for the single-column 6×9 version, and would suggest that one respondent stick with the canonical two-column print-oriented C&I.

- Likelihood that you'd read issues; Likelihood that you'd read all of an issue; Likelihood that you'd publicize the issue to others: I'm clustering all three together because the results were identical: Four said "about the same" and one said "more." I'll admit that I was hoping for slightly better responses, especially for the last one, since awareness of *C&I* outside of the core readership (somewhere between 8 and 800 people?) depends on people publicizing issues and essays.

"Would you pay for (or contribute toward) the Online PDF version?" Given that this was an anonymous survey and that nobody was actually making a commitment, the results are especially interesting in terms of the value people place on *C&I:*

- Four people said "Possibly: No more than $1/issue or $10-$12/year."
- One person said "Possibly: Up to $2.50/issue or $25/year."
- Nobody said "No." Nobody said "Possibly: More than $25/year."

I conclude that providing an online version might yield contributions totaling as much as $73/year, total, if I was really lucky. Last year, total contributions were just over $100; so far, there have been no contributions in 2012.

"Do you think it's worthwhile to generate this version (in addition to the existing PDF, not in place of it)?"

- Not at all: One person
- Yes, if it takes less than 30 minutes per issue to create: Four people.
- Yes, if it takes up to an hour per issue to create and Yes, no matter how much time it takes: Nobody.

"What changes would make an Online PDF version more desirable?" I received three responses. Here they are, in full:

> I like it fine. However, I'm used to the other PDF version which appears smaller on my computer screen. I also like the two column layout. However, I could get used to the new version very easily.
>
> What you've done with this is great. The biggest issue I have with the current online PDF version is the columns and the constant scrolling.
>
> I would really prefer to have the TOC back. That is pretty much the first thing I look at once I have downloaded an issue.

Conclusions and Next Steps

I am offering an online version, at least for a while. The online version *does* include "Inside this Issue"—changing the page numbers only takes about 2 minutes—but it does not include any attempts at copyfitting (cleaning up bad breaks, etc., which probably takes 4-6 hours for a typical issue), so it will be typographically crude compared to the two-column version. It is

single-column, 28 picas wide, which is still within the range considered to be a readable line width. (Each column of the two-column version is 20 picas wide; many/most trade paperbacks have 26 pica body text width.) A 28-pica width should fit very nicely on iPads, netbooks and other e-devices with at least 9″ screens, and shouldn't be too bad on 6″-7″ devices.

I should and probably will change the wording on the C&I invitation to contribute to suggest as little as $10/year. Using Paypal, $1/issue contributions seem almost pointless.

Based on responses to the first survey, it might make sense to do the online PDF and scrap the HTML essays. In any case, the "real" *C&I* will continue to be the two-column, carefully copyfitted, rint-oriented PDF.

Thanks to the five people who responded and, for that matter, to the dozen who apparently checked out the online-oriented version but felt no need to respond.

Social Networks

The Social Network Scene, Part 1

I'm one of those grumps who regard "social media" as a nonsense term (all media, whether online or offline, are to some extent social, and I don't find that the term defines anything useful)—but social networks are real, as they have been ever since humans and animals started congregating in groups of more than two.

Most folks mean *internet* social networks when they say "social networks," to be sure. The Rotary is a network of social networks, as is PTA, as is Girl Scouts, as are churches. That may not be all they are, but it's part of what they are. In some ways internet social networks are weaker than face-to-face social networks: You're mostly dealing with text, a low-res version of person-to-person interaction, and there are probably people in your internet social networks who you'd never dream of having in your face-to-face social networks. (I was about to say "real-life" or "real-world," but LinkedIn, Twitter, FriendFeed and those other ones are certainly real-world enough, although I'm not sure I'd make that claim for Second Life.)

This relatively specific section heading has emerged from the Great *Cites & Insights* Reduction of 2012 because it doesn't fit well elsewhere and because I've gotten more involved in thinking about and researching social networks. (Originally, I'd been researching blogs, and I do *not* regard blogs as social networks—they're online publishing, a whole different ballgame.) If nothing else, my survey of the social networking presence of 5,958 public libraries in 38 states establishes me as a tenacious social network researcher, if not necessarily a guru or big success at it.

All of which is preface for a set of cites & insights covering social networks in general (and, for a few lesser ones, in specific)—the "sn" tag in my Diigo library. (Don't bother looking. I changed these items to "snx" as I printed out leadsheets, and I delete Diigo tags as I write about items.) That's as compared to a number of more specific tags for possible future essays: As of February 24, 2012, the list includes sn-delicious (12 items), sn-fb (29 items), sn-googleplus (53 items) and sn-twitter (46 items). Meanwhile, some notes about a variety of social network commentaries over the past three or four years…mostly arranged chronologically, oldest first.

Part 1? It's already clear that the 43 items that *were* tagged "sn" without a qualifier offer me too much opportunity for comment to put them all into one essay, especially since this essay doesn't begin to be substantive enough for a one-essay issue. So I'll have to split them into several parts—at least two, probably three or four.

Socially Awkward Networks

That's Marcia Conner's title for this April 6, 2008 post on the *Fast Company* blog—a post that begins with an odd disclaimer: "This blog is written by a member of our expert blogging community and expresses that expert's views alone." The title "expert blogger" is interesting by itself, as is the felt need to explicitly disclaim *Fast Company* endorsement. Here's the opening:

> A woman, who as a girl in gradeschool taunted me enthusiastically, contacted me through a social network site asking if I planned to attend an upcoming reunion.
>
> At first I didn't think much about it. I assumed she was on some committee for the gathering of once inelegant adolescents and she was contacting me as part of her new do-good campaign.
>
> I replied in a perfunctory noncommittal way, and tucked her married name into my mental rolodex of people to avoid calls from if they appear on callerID.
>
> She wrote again, reporting I looked healthy in my miniature photo and that I must be happy, how did I do it? Then she asked if we could connect directly on the site so we could correspond again.

After a little more discussion of this particular case she gets to the meat of the issue:

> Should our social networks include only people we like, those we want to socialize with, and as my friend Jimm says, "Those we'd agree to take camping"? I don't believe they were designed to be personal discomfort-free zones. Do you?

No. Or sort of. Or…well, consider the last two paragraphs carefully:

> If this former mean-girl (who has been nothing but sweet and cheerful in our recent communiqué) has a relationship with someone who can help me close an important deal or land a dream assignment, it should not matter she invited my friends to a slumber party in fifth grade while stridently leaving me out. However, what about announcing to everyone in the junior high cafeteria I'd sneezed peas out my nose (which I hadn't, it was mustard)?!
>
> All social situations offer us the opportunity to be uncomfortable in unexpected ways. We shouldn't expect online social networks to be any different. It just seems easier to avoid the awkwardness when there's no auto-reminder in seven days you haven't yet engaged.

I have loads of people who I chat with (somewhat asynchronously) on Friendfeed and would never take camping (but then, I'm an introvert and a little shy, and there are very few people I *would* take camping)—but nobody who's gone out of their way to torment me in the past. If I treated social networks as primarily business tools, as ways to "close an important deal or land a dream assignment," I'd probably cast an even broader net. But to me, that's LinkedIn. I'd like to think that most people who are active participants on Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and especially places like Friendfeed aren't only there for the money and self-advancement. That's not social networking, it's business networking: "How can this person forward my own agenda?" I guess business networks *should* be socially awkward, and I'd probably be a real downer at a Tupperware "party."

After nearly four years, there are no comments whatsoever. Given the thrust of this post, I found myself clicking through to Conner's website. She's a consultant on "social learning" and collaboration. Why am I not surprised? Here's the first paragraph of the "Work with me" section of her fancy, rotating-billboard, site:

> For large corporations, I address change readiness and overcome stymied collaboration with strategic consulting, cultural assessments, level-setting education, and blueprints to remove the obstacles in your path to success.

I'm impressed. Or not. I do sometimes wonder how many people effectively treat all social networks as variants of LinkedIn, as places where they're primarily pushing their own agenda? Maybe I don't want to know…

Community May Not Scale

Remember the odd claim that the power of a network increased as the square of its numbers, or something like that? Metcalfe's Law, "the value of a telecommunications network is proportional to the square of the number of connected users of the system." Whether the "law" makes sense or not from a pure telecommunications perspective, it's bizarre-

world when you substitute "social" for "telecommunications," yet some social networks seem predicated on the idea that you should be constantly adding more connections. If you find it great to connect with 100 people on Facebook, it would be *nine times as great* to connect with 300, and 100 times as great if you just had 1,000 contacts. (David P. Reed ups the ante with "Reed's Law," which says the factor is really 2 to the nth, where n is the number of contacts. That makes a network of 20 people *one thousand times* more valuable than a network of 10 people—actually 1,028—and so on, with each additional 10 people making the network 1,028 times more powerful.)

Or not. This theme will come up a couple of times in this meandering journey. This time, it's actually the name of a wiki page, CommunityMayNotScale. (At first, I thought this *was* a wiki—but it turns out to be just one page on MeatballWiki, "a community of active practitioners striving to teach each other how to organize people using online tools.") If "community" equates to social network (or face-to-face social network), it's an interesting perspective. The first two paragraphs on the page:

> A community relies on trust and respect. These qualities are easy to find in communities where all of the members recognize and know each other. They are much harder to find among people who are interacting mostly as strangers.
>
> When a group grows from dozens of individuals to thousands, it becomes impossible to feel any real acquaintance with more than a fraction of the population. When this happens, community standards and unwritten rules stop working. The group loses focus. Things fall apart.

Maybe the best quick response to any of these "laws" is one that appears on the wiki: The anti-reductionism law, "Every attempt to capture a human-interaction phenomena by just one number, however smartly derived, is doomed to failure."

The page includes some good commentary about the need for (and danger of) subcommunities. There's philosophizing, some of it pointed when you consider social networking issues—such as this (slightly excerpted and anonymous):

> Currently what intrigues me is that communities are doomed to failure. So when activity dies down on this Wiki (or when it gets too much to handle!) I'll (gasp!) have to find some other place to carry on this sort of conversation? What if there are other communities that I'll never find that talk about this, and I'll never benefit from their conversation? These sorts of questions nag me a tad, but I guess I'll file it under the unfortunate consequences of HumanNature?. I guess I'm simply sad to see the passing of communities. (E.g., SlashDot is certainly not what it was, though opinions differ on whether what it has become. My own opinion is that it's

> degrading terribly.) Maybe I should focus more on the excitement of discovering new ones like MeatballWiki.
>
> My other point of curiosity is why we even pursue OnlineCommunity. There are perfect outlets for community in the RealWorld amongst our neighbors, coworkers, etc. Granted, OnlineCommunity enables us to commune on the basis of topics of interest, rather than physical proximity, but is either one intrinsically more worthwhile than the other? Why have I only met one of my neighbors? (My wife and I try to fix cookies for new neighbors.) What do we gain from OnlineCommunity that we cannot get from PhysicalCommunity?? And vice-versa? Nebulous thoughts in my mind right now as I explore my priorities wrt computing, my job, and simply enjoying life.

For those of you who get as tired of CombinedWordWikiSpeak as I do, apologies—I'll avoid more long quotations. Indeed, I think that's all I'll say about the page—and about the larger wiki, which soon becomes too self-referential and layered for my liking. The wiki seems to be more about wikis as communities than social networks as such, and is interesting in its own right. My sense is that wikis as a movement or methodology have declined from their glory years, perhaps even more so than blogging, but I could be wrong. As far as I can tell, the page referenced here has been largely inactive since late 2009, although the wiki continues to have some activity. You might find it interesting.

Clive Thompson in Praise of Online Obscurity

Clive Thompson's January 25, 2010 *Wired* column addresses the issue of social network scaling, and as is frequently the case for Thompson, he makes better sense than I'm used to from *Wired.* After noting conventional wisdom—the bigger your social network, the better—he's "been thinking about the downside of having a huge online audience. When you go from having a few hundred Twitter followers to ten thousand, something unexpected happens: Social networking starts to break down."

He offers a case in point: Maureen Evans, who started tweeting in 2006, got almost 100 followers, enjoyed the conversational nature of Twitter, and started tweeting recipes.

> She soon amassed 3,000 followers, but her online life still felt like a small town: Among the regulars, people knew each other and enjoyed conversing. But as her audience grew and grew, eventually cracking 13,000, the sense of community evaporated. People stopped talking to one another or even talking to her. "It became dead silence," she marvels.

Why? I think I'm with Thompson on this:

> Because socializing doesn't scale. Once a group reaches a certain size, each participant starts to feel anonymous again, and the person they're following—who once seemed proximal, like a friend—now seems larger

> than life and remote. "They feel they can't possibly be the person who's going to make the useful contribution," Evans says. So the conversation stops. Evans isn't alone. I've heard this story again and again from those who've risen into the lower ranks of microfame. At a few hundred or a few thousand followers, they're having fun—but any bigger and it falls apart. Social media stops being social. It's no longer a bantering process of thinking and living out loud. It becomes old-fashioned broadcasting.

His "lesson" is in the title: There's value in obscurity. You can have lively, strange, *open* conversations among a few dozen (or maybe a few hundred) people—but when the conversation gets a little too big, it starts to shut down. "Not only do audiences feel estranged, the participants also start self-censoring. People who suddenly find themselves with really huge audiences often start writing more cautiously, like politicians."

It's the problem of the middle.

> If someone's got 1.5 million followers on Twitter, they're one of the rare and straightforwardly famous folks online. Like a digital Oprah, they enjoy a massive audience that might even generate revenue. There's no pretense of intimacy with their audience, so there's no conversation to spoil. Meanwhile, if you have a hundred followers, you're clearly just chatting with pals. It's the middle ground—when someone amasses, say, tens of thousands of followers—where the social contract of social media becomes murky.

Admittedly, I'm one of those confused old souls who find Twitter's "conversations" unsatisfactory, maybe because I'm not camped there all the time. Friendfeed's conversational mode works far better for me (as would, I suspect, the clone of that mode in Facebook—and the emulation in Google+). I think one reason Friendfeed works well for me *in general* is that it's a "failure" as a social network: It's never grown much beyond a million or two. Even there, though, the LSW community has more than 700 members; if those members were all active (they're not), I wonder whether the conversations would diminish. Right now, I suspect, LSW folks censor ourselves a bit more than we might like, at least at times.

The comment stream? A couple of realists point out that the primary purpose of most social networks is to expose as many people as possible to ads in as many ways as possible, so companies have no motivation to encourage obscurity. One interesting point becomes clear toward the end of the comments: *Wired* does a crappy job of monitoring older content for spam comments.

I'll Get Back To You…

When I Get Back To You. That's the full title of a June 10, 2009 post by John Scalzi at *Whatever*—and as you might expect, it's just full of good sense.

Scalzi starts off with a New York *Times* piece on smartphones "morphing from luxury to necessity" with this observation on responding to email or text:

> "The social norm is that you should respond within a couple of hours, if not immediately," said David E. Meyer, a professor of psychology at the University of Michigan. "If you don't, it is assumed you are out to lunch mentally, out of it socially, or don't like the person who sent the e-mail."

Here's Scalzi's one-paragraph response, which might actually be all that needs to be said:

> All together, now: Bullshit.

MSWord thinks "All together" should be "Altogether." Word is wrong, as is frequently the case with its grammar/spelling corrections. Scalzi, on the other hand, is right. He does provide a little expansion of his one-word summary. He makes three basic points, and I'll quote just the first sentence of each—after all, you really need to get the Full Scalzi by reading his blog (and the extended comment streams), and I don't see a waiver of copyright:

> First: If you are the sort of person who believes that all your e-mails/texts must be responded to instantaneously or sooner, you may be a self-absorbed twit…
>
> Second: If you're the sort of person who believes that all e-mails/texts must be responded to instantaneously or sooner, that probably means you're ignoring something important right in front of you, like the other person at the table, or traffic on the freeway, or a large dog about to savage you because you're carelessly walking on his lawn…
>
> Third: Can we all agree that we *don't* want to live in a world where we are obliged to respond to e-mails/text in an unrealistically short period of time, lest we be thought an enormous douchenozzle?...

Oh my yes. Scalzi *does* have a smartphone and *does* use it for email and texting, but, well… (and with a disclaimer regarding his wife, who *of course* he responds to as rapidly as possible)

> Not answering immediately does not mean I don't like you; it means I have my own life and I'm busy with it. If you can't manage to grasp that basic and obvious fact, that goes into the bin marked "your problems," not mine.

I have to say this has almost never been an issue with me: Either library folk are more understanding of asynchronicity, or those who tried to converse with me have already given up and regard me as an antisocial jerk. I'd like to think it's the former. I use Friendfeed a lot, more than I probably should—but I also keep it on pause, all the time, because I can't cope with the InstaUpdates.

Only 87 comments, which isn't a lot for *Whatever*. I see a lot of expansion on Scalzi's response and very little pushback. For example, JJS:

> One thing I like about e-mail is that it will sit there patiently until I get home or get unbusy. Even though I am retired and have lots of free time, I still am not going to sit in front of my computer all day just to see if I get an e-mail that "must be answered immediately."
>
> And if some self-important twit decided that means I don't like him/her, s/he is probably correct.

Or MattMarovich (before a much longer paragraph):

> I've had some one try to tell me that it was rude that I didn't respond to their e-mail right away.
>
> I told them that it was rude for them to assume they had any say in how I ran my personal life.

About the only pushback regards work email, and *of course* that's a different situation (as Scalzi notes in the comment stream), although even there it's absurd to expect instant responses to most email (that's what phones are for—or, better yet, walking over to the other person's desk/cubicle/office/phone booth). I'm a little bemused by this, from "rick":

> Now, at some point a lack of a reply is either rude or unprofessional assuming the person involved is someone with whom you have a relationship (personal or professional).

Really? A fair number of the semi-personal/semi-professional emails I receive don't appear to *require* a response. Should I be saying "Thank you for sending that!" each time somebody emails something? Really? (Yes, I know, I'm *supposed* to do a "Thanks for the comment!" every time somebody comments on *Walt at Random*. I'm such a *baaaad* blogger.)

And this, from "coolstar":

> hmmm, I consider NOT answering emails after you read them to be uncivilized. I'm in academia, and I tell students I'll NEVER answer the phone if they call, but can get back to them very quickly thru email. I treat friends mostly the same way in regards to email. On the third hand, I consider smartphones and cell phones in general to be the height of uncivilzed behavior and only own a cell phone for emergencies. I suspect most people in academia feel more or less the same about email. Twitter? Text messaging? corporal punishment isn't ALL BAD. (ask your local k-12 or college teacher about texting…..)

So not answering the phone is entirely reasonable and polite, but not responding to emails is "uncivilized"? As Scalzi would say, Whatever.

The best comment of the bunch might be this from George William Herbert, even if it is slightly offtopic:

> John writes:

> "But the main reason I have the phone is so that if my car flips and I'm pinned under two tons of Honda steel, I can call for help."
>
> Wow, is it very common or standard that whenever a Honda flips, another pair of Hondas immediately dogpile on top of it to get enough combined mass for the police and passers-by to take the incident seriously?

A basic 2012 Civic weighs just under 2,900 pounds and an Accord EX is about 1.8 tons, but what a great line!

The Pop of Social Media?

Here's a somewhat unusual perspective from 2.5 years ago, as expressed by Paul Benjou on July 26, 2009 at *Media Life*: "Listen for the pop of social media." By which Benjou means the pop of the balloon:

> How foolish can we be? Plenty, it appears, even after we said we learned our lesson after the dot.com meltdown eight years ago.
>
> We have billions being invested in what's called social media, from Facebook to MySpace to Twitter, and billions more to come, and yet no one has yet to figure out how to monetize them--make money.

He uses the $580 million purchase of MySpace as a horrible example of absurd valuation, and in that particular case it's hard to argue: Rubert Murdoch managed to buy high and sell low, paying $580 million in July 2005 and selling for $35 million just six years later (in June 2011). Benjou seems to think MySpace is typical:

> Facebook still has no business model that offers even a hint of promise for making money, and Zuckerberg has said, hey, no hurry, in three years we set about figuring that out. More growth is the near-term focus.
>
> In just three years, Twitter had lept to become the third-most-popular social network, and it too has no business model offering even a hint of return for investors…
>
> Twitter is just the latest pretty, helium-filled balloon that everyone wants to hold until the novelty wears thin or the gas escapes.
>
> The fact is, it's a good bet these social networking sites will never figure out a workable business model because there may not be one…

He believes that advertising just won't work on social network sites because it's "social interference" and because telemarketing has been so badly received. (Which is why there are no more telemarketing firms, right?)

> One might argue that over time internet users will give in and accept advertising on their social networking sites. One might also reason that over time hell will indeed freeze over and Canada will indeed run dry. But it is the sort of bet anyone in their right mind would place billions on? No.

Or one might argue that smart site designers will find ways to add advertising that don't bother users too much. Maybe Facebook's sidebar

full of right-wing ads (at least for me) is a case in point. Maybe Twitter's "sponsored tweets" (which seem less deranged in general than Facebook's "click here for a nutcase rightwing survey" ads) will work. Google seems to have found a way to sell a buck or two in advertising without wholly losing us.

He offers lessons to learn—e.g., that "we still don't fully appreciate how different and unique a medium the internet really is." That's true. I, for one, don't regard the internet as a medium (in any meaningful sense) any more than I regard paper as a medium (in any meaningful sense). The internet is a way of carrying messages; it includes many different media, just as print includes many different media. Newspapers aren't magazines aren't textbooks aren't print-on-demand micropublications aren't…why should the internet be different? The internet is a carrier, just as paper is a carrier.

> In old media, if you were a Murdoch, you could throw billions at something, newspapers or magazines or television, and gain market share.
>
> On the internet, you can throw billions at something and watch those billions disappear into a netherworld, never to be seen again. What matters on the internet is not bucks but imagination.

What matters in "old media" is also thought and imagination, at least in the long run—and it's naïve to say that money doesn't matter at all on the internet.

It's been 2.5 years since this post. Facebook apparently had $3.7 billion in revenues in 2011, most of it from advertising, most of that from Microsoft-supplied banners. Even Twitter has *some* revenue ($140 million estimated for 2010—a little more than MySpace's $109 million estimate for 2011), although not much.

Am I certain Twitter will be around for the long term? Not really. For that matter, I think it no more certain that Facebook will be a major player ten years from now than I do that MySpace would be a profitable investment for Rupert Murdoch. But this article's considerably overstated: Sometimes, ads *do* work.

Debate on Social Networks

The title of Steven Hodson's August 27, 2009 piece at *The Inquisitr* is "Is Social Media ruining the good old heated debate"—without a question mark. Hodson's answer is clearly *yes*—and he seems to think this is a bad thing. He cites other posts with a common thread that "we are all becoming a bunch of agreeable wishy washy Charlie Brown types," excludes trolls and issue-oriented blogging (and Slashdot) from the discussion, and defines his study space as follows:

> What we are talking about is the Social Media arena where services like Twitter and Facebook are the face of social media networks. We are talking

> about those bloggers who deal with the whole social media ecosphere. We are talking about the marketers, PR people and other promoters of the whole idea of Social Media.

Maybe that last phrase is key: He's focusing on "promoters of the whole idea of Social Media." In which case, my response to the pseudo-question would be "Who cares?" As he discusses comments on other posts, he reveals that even those who Believe in Social Media (the repeated capital S and M *can't* just be a typing problem) have problems defining it—e.g., the person who disagrees cites online journalism as a counterpoint. "Excuse me but none of those examples have anything to do with social media." Aha: So media that are online and encourage comments are *not* social media?

If the point is that social networks tend to encourage agreement more than disagreement, well, yes, that's probably true. After all, Facebook doesn't have an "enemies and antagonists" flag, where you and someone else agree that you want to argue with each other constantly. Most social networks are *social*—they are designed to bring together people who have things in common. And social networks represent just one aspect of online communications, including places where disagreement is frequent and sometimes sharp, even without necessarily being hostile or trollish.

I could cite Friendfeed, and especially the LSW contingent, as a counterexample, but even there, it's easier to agree than it is to disagree—and sharp disagreements are frequently misunderstood.

Hodson offers four basic reasons why "can't we all just get along?" seems to be the prevailing theme in social networks: Time (it takes time to craft a reasoned objection and to defend one's own viewpoint), attention span (some folks aren't willing to follow lengthy discussions), fear (nobody wants to be called a troll) and closed circles ("closed" is the wrong word, but yes, social networks tend to encourage circles of people with similar views—explicitly so in Friendfeed, Google+, and Facebook's new Circles feature).

The rest of the discussion makes it even clearer that Hodson's audience of interest is solipsistic: It's the Social Media Gurus, talking about Social Media to other Social Media Gurus. Talk about your closed circles! Think I'm joking?

> This idea that Social Media is all about "goodness and light" can be seen in the popularity and reader, follower/friends, numbers. Take a look on Twitter and the Social Media leader board there and you will see that the "always positive" contingent has follower numbers that are through the roof, whereas those that like to push the limits, those that question the 'status quo' have a lot less followers e.g.: @1938media. When it comes to blogs it is people like Chris Brogan, Louis Gray and others who find their readership grow by leaps and bounds. Those on the other hand who

> constantly question the "social media party line" often find themselves relegated to the blogging hinterland.

Now blogs do seem to be part of social media, where when it suited Hodson's argument he excluded them. In any case, we're talking about the promoters here. The problem Hodson sees is that "all this warm and fuzzy can make things very boring and eventually drain the life out of Social Media." If that means less blather from promoters and maybe the term Social Media disappearing altogether, I can only say "Hooray!" and pat Hodson on the virtual back.

There do not appear to be any comments. Maybe because the post is a trifle disagreeable?

In practice, there's *loads* of discussion on the internet. I don't believe social networks are the natural homes for sharp disagreement, and I don't believe they need to be: There are lots of other venues, lots of other media carried over the internet.

On the Other Hand…

There's a post that I never got around to posting, having to do with a flavor of Hodson's issue. To wit: It's sometimes unclear whether somebody offering an opinion while on Friendfeed or Facebook is interested in alternative opinions—or only in agreement and support. That can be very troublesome.

For example, let's say you post "I really like Veal Scallopini" on Friendfeed. You'll get some people saying "Yum" or various badly spelled cute sayings, some mentioning restaurants that serve great veal scallopini, some mentioning other veal treatments. But you're also likely to get someone saying "I don't eat baby calves," possibly somebody saying "Yuck!" and maybe somebody starting in on the merits of a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle.

That's just one example. Somebody could be espousing the merits of a musical group, or an author they love, or a flick or TV show, or…

Sometimes there ensues a fascinating range of opinions. But sometimes the person making the original comment lashes out at anybody who disagrees, in essence telling them that their negativity is not welcome here.

Maybe it's because I'm an introvert, maybe it's because this is all happening in a text environment rather than face to face, maybe I'm not sufficiently tuned in to nuance—but damned if I can tell when somebody's interested in alternative ideas and when they *only want agreement*. Maybe there should be a special emoticon that means "agree or shut up!" or one that says "I welcome disagreement." Or maybe I'm just not wholly attuned to the idea that social networks don't deal well with disagreement?

Antisocial Networking

Dan Wallach used that title for this October 2, 2009 post at *Freedom to Tinker* (which has been a group blog for some time). It's initially about Google Wave (remember Google Wave?), but it's really about inconsistencies in the way social networks handle datasharing and comments.

It's an interesting perspective, and since it carries a Creative Commons BY-NC license, I'll share most of it (omitting the first para) before taking mild issue with it (and noting how things have and haven't changed):

> How am I supposed to know that there's something new going on at Wave? Right now, I need to keep a tab open in my browser and check in, every once in a while, to see what's up. Right now, my standard set of tabs includes my Gmail, calendar, RSS reader, New York Times homepage, Facebook page, and now Google Wave. Add in the occasional Twitter tab (or dedicated Twitter client, if I feel like running it) plus I'll occasionally have an IM window open. All of these things are competing for my attention when I'm supposed to be getting real work done.
>
> A common way that people try to solve this problem is by building bridges between these services. [Describes some of those ways.]
>
> The bigger problem is that these various vendors and technologies have different data models for visibility and for how metadata is represented…
>
> Comments are a favorite area for people to complain…
>
> Given these disparate data models, there's no easy way to unify Twitter and Facebook, much less the commenting disaspora, even assuming you could sort out the security concerns and you could work around Facebook's tendency to want to restrict the flow of data out of its system. This is all the more frustrating because RSS completely solved the initial problem of distributing new blog posts in the blog universe. I used to keep a bunch of tabs open to various blog-like things that I followed, but that quickly proved unwieldy, whereas an RSS aggregator (Google Reader, for me) solved the problem nicely. Could there ever be a social network/microblogging aggregator?
>
> There are no lack of standards-in-the-wings that would like to do this. (See, for example, OpenMicroBlogging, or our own work on BirdFeeder.) Something like Google Wave could subsume every one of these platforms, although I fear that integrating so many different data models would inevitably result in a deeply clunky UI.
>
> In the end, I think the federation ideas behind Google Wave and BirdFeeder, and good old RSS blog feeds, will ultimately win out, with interoperability between the big vendors, just like they interoperate with email. Getting there, however, isn't going to happen easily.

Among the relatively small group of comments is one from Khürt L Williams who says he's "never had a problem getting twiiter, facebook, friendfeed, and my blog comments to follow me around the Web" and notes some of the paths and special tools (both Williams and Wallach are, or have been, Friendfeed users, and Wallach notes that Friendfeed could be a pretty good aggregator). Wallach says the third-party tools "really strike me as a kludge" and that interoperability should be integrated by design; "anonymous" asserts that the internet *itself* is a kludge. "Henson" says "I think we all just want a way to have a single presence online." He offers another "we all" that I regard as only slightly less probable.

I dunno. I'm fairly active (by my somewhat asocial standards) in Friendfeed (nearing 10,000 posts and comments, and I spend a lot of time there), a little more active than I expected on Facebook and Google+ (although still infrequently, still with *very* few actual comments), vaguely present on Twitter and almost wholly inactive on LinkedIn and ALA Connect. I don't *want* a "single presence online." I don't feed all my Netflix queue additions to Friendfeed or Facebook or anywhere else. While my blog posts automatically pop up on Friendfeed, they don't on Twitter, Facebook or Google+, and that's deliberate. I really don't want Facebook as the only game in town, any more than I want Google+ to serve that purpose.

But that's what *they* want. The services increasingly make it easy to import stuff automatically—and hard to export stuff automatically. That's reasonable from the services' perspectives: They need as many eyeballs for as many hours as possible, so they have product to sell to their actual customers, the advertisers. That's reality as long as we have free social networking services. I suspect it limits interoperability—and I'm not at all certain that's a bad thing. Of course, I'm not Wallach: I rarely have more than three tabs open at any time.

Looking Back: hypePad and buzzkill

The previous set of section names for *Cites & Insights* included one that not only didn't make the cut, it's not reflected in the replacements: THE ZEITGEIST. It wasn't used that often—five times in all, as far as I can tell—and the last one landed with such a "tree in the forest" non-effect that I pretty much gave up the idea. Iris Jastram suggested the name (actually "preserving the zeitgeist") as something *Cites & Insights* does or has done, for which I thank her: Even if I dropped the section name, I like the idea.

The very first essay tagged as THE ZEITGEIST appeared in the Spring 2010 issue (and was the entirety of that issue other than a BIBS & BLATHER on sponsorship and the surprise loss of my part-time job). The essay-specific subtitle was HYPEPAD AND BUZZKILL.

I reread that essay recently as part of my ongoing process of interleaving old Cites & Insights printed issues in with my flow of other magazines. At this writing, I'm about two months behind on other magazines and slightly less than two *years* behind on C&I, but the latter's deliberate: I insert one issue of *C&I* in front of each *Condé Nast Traveler* when that magazine arrives. By the time I reread an issue, I've long since forgotten it, so I can read it freshly. That's an attempt to replicate the experience of reading my magazine columns (all of which are now defunct, but it was a good 27 years) in print, a few months after writing them.

Anyway…

So I read this essay. At first I thought it would be a prime candidate for a "wrong, wrong, wrong" *mea culpa* about how badly off I was on my projections. Nothing wrong with being wrong once in a while—and admitting it.

Except that I didn't make any projections regarding sales for the iPad: That part of the article wasn't about the iPad itself, it was about the sheer hype and hyperbole (not quite the same thing) before and immediately after its introduction. I don't see any need to apologize for anything I said in the article. In fact, while the iPad has sold much better than most non-Apple-centric observers expected, it has *not* destroyed ereaders, it has *not* wiped out netbooks or PCs or open computing (unless you're one of those for whom a slowing of sales *increases* constitutes "wiped out"), and I don't believe it's changed everything. I'm still not part of the target market. My brother and sister-in-law are (they travel a lot more, for one thing), and they both have iPads (one of them is on a second-generation unit). They love them. They're very intelligent people. We've tried them out. So far, we've found no particular desire to buy one—although there have been uses for which I've suggested that my wife might want one. So far, she doesn't. If we wanted to spend more on computing and media consumption, switching to cable broadband from our increasingly-flaky DSL would probably come way ahead of buying iPads. (By the way, Apple's down to 57% of the tablet market…but you can't prove that by pundits who still proclaim that there is no tablet market, only an iPad market. Using that logic. there is no personal computing market, only a Windows market—except that Windows still has more than 90% market share.)

As for the buzzkill section, for which the actual section heading was BUZZKILL: GOOGLE SCREWS UP, I still think that's a fair summary. Remember Google Buzz? How it was an instant success—because Google simply dumped everybody into it, populating your "social network" with email contacts? It was pretty much a disaster, and Google bailed out. Google+ may not be perfect (not by a long shot!), but it's better.

I'm going to quote the final subsection of that essay, "Thinking about the Parallels." I believe it's held up pretty well:

> Both Google and Apple are large companies in Silicon Valley, both of which rely heavily on user trust and faith. Both have groups of admirers who proclaim they can do no wrong and assail doubters.
>
> As far as I can tell, Apple didn't *actively* generate the level of hype, although the company certainly did its share of leaking and dissembling. Most of the hypePad story is about reactions and expectations, not about the device itself or Apple's handling of it. I've never been much of an Apple person, and I'm not a great fan of Steve Jobs. That said, and discounting nonsense like "magical" and "revolutionary," the iPad will succeed or fail largely on its own merits. While those merits may not meet *my* needs—and while I do believe you're better off thinking of the iPad as an appliance, not another kind of computer, and that the closed model is dangerous—there's no doubt its merits are real. It's up to the public, early adopters and others, to decide whether the tablet form factor finally makes sense. It's up to other companies to raise the bar that the iPad sets—which, depending on what people are looking for, may be easy or difficult.
>
> Google was in charge of its own destiny. Google screwed up big time. I've generally been a cautious fan of Google. I like Gmail a lot. I think the Google Books project has many good aspects and *could have been* a blow for fair use (if Google hadn't caved). I'll be more cautious in the future about turning any part of my virtual life over to my former neighbors in Mountain View. Where I've usually been negatively disposed toward Apple, I've usually been positive (if cautious) about Google. In this case, *Google screwed up*. With any luck, Buzz will go the way of Orkut and Google users will get a lot more cautious.
>
> Apple +1, Google -1. Is that a fair parallel?

Now a quick confession: This began as a blog post and was copied for use in THE FRONT in this issue—but as I was organizing items in Diigo, I found three that relate primarily to Google buzz. So I've moved the other stuff here, followed by notes on those three items.

Buzz or Zzzzzzzz….

I may not have the right number of zs in the title of this February 10, 2010 post at *Informationoverlord*, but you get the idea.

> And so it came to pass that Google decided it wanted to be Friendfeed. Yes, the Gman has rolled out its attempt to get in on some Twitter/Friendfiend/Facebook Lifestreaming action. Are you excited? No, neither is anyone else really. We remember that Google bought Jaiku a few years back, sat on it, did nothing and then stopped supporting it and left it essentially to die. In case you don't know, Jaiku was the first real challenger to Twitter—and, get this, it was BETTER. No, really, it was. When Google bought it I was one of a number of people who thought that they were going to wipe the floor with Twitter with it. Back then they could have

> done it, Twitter was still mostly free of celebs and indeed anyone other than web2.0 obsessives, but they did nothing.

The writer throws in a quick slap at Google Wave—"a 'er, sorry but no one is really sure what the hell this is actually for yet' system"—and provides a fairly thorough discussion of buzz. The good? You were likely to be tempted to try it if you already had a Google account and gmail. But without a gmail account and Google profile, you really *couldn*'t use it, and if you already liked Facebook jes' fine, why would you care? (That's a *huge* "if," to be sure.) Also, routing everything through your gmail inbox was a bad idea. The writer also offers some comments about Google's skill at seamlessness, and gets at what buzz really is all about: "Mobile and advertising." Oddly, as a non-mobile user, I didn't get that first part.

> Does it Fly
>
> Yes and No. As with Yahoo's attempt last year, if you live your life in the email client then there is a good chance that you might find yourself using Buzz, even if you are only using it as a lifestreaming service. Are people, even Google geeks, going to abandon Twitter or Facebook for it, no. Could Google conceivably get them to use buzz to interact with those services—especially for status updates—absolutely.

In practice, this didn't happen. buzz killed itself off pretty rapidly, and Google came back a couple of years later with Google+.

Buzz??? More Like A Frenetic Hum…

That's Johnny Worthington at *JohnnyWorthington.com*, posted February 11, 2010. After a note about "being let into the fairground while they're still setting it up" and how his wave account's become unusable, he gets to the point:

> [t]he use of social media has now matured. There is a certain level of expectation for features such as selective hide and lists. I want a scalpel, not a sword. I have spent many hours crafting my FriendFeed and Facebook instances into carefully managed gardens. Just because you're shinny and new doesn't make we want to invest the same amount of care if the tools for such management are still 'coming soon'.
>
> I don't need ANOTHER social media space, so you better shit gold bars straight out of the gate or your get in put in the 'meh, I'll keep an eye on you' box.

Or you drop it, wait a while, add a lot more development and restart with a new name…

Web Strategy Matrix: Google Buzz vs Facebook vs MySpace vs Twitter (Feb 2010)
Long title and an interesting post, by Jeremiah Owyang on February 11, 2010 at *Web Strategy*—and I'm mostly pointing to it as a snapshot in time. Owyang says his "career mission" is "To cut out the hype and help companies make sense of what to do. For those fraught with information overload, this definitive matrix distills what matters." Note "companies," not "people," and that's probably significant. Indeed, his "executive summary" on Google buzz is full of the bafflegab I've come to associate with "social media" folks, especially those selling to companies. And, to be sure, he's got that bottom-line attitude: "The feature set of newly spawned Google Buzz isn't important, what matters is their ability to aggregate social content which will impact search strategy for businesses trying to reach consumers…"

That's followed by a long five-column table offering his take on four social networks in each of several areas. He doesn't think Twitter will be a destination; as of 2010, he regards Myspace users as "heavily engaged" and thinks that will continue; and lots more. He's surprisingly negative about Twitter and positive about Myspace (he's repetitive about his assertion that Twitter will become an invisible utility) and if you have the proper corporate mindset, it's at least interesting. Quite a few comments, but given that most of those I checked were back-slapping agreement from other ad and SEO folks, I didn't read the whole group. One thing becomes clear, and is probably something useful for people to remember: Those who make money from social networks think of them as "B2C channels"—business to consumer. Any actual conversation among "consumers" (not people, not citizens, *consumers*) is peripheral.

Personal Branding

What better way to end this assortment of mostly two- to three-year-old blather about social networks than with a post related to one of my favorite bugaboos, "personal branding." Not the kind that happens in the Haight and involves heated metals and flesh, but the far less wholesome idea that we should all treat ourselves as brands, as little tiny corporations intent on selling ourselves.

This particular screed is entitled "10 Ways to Get Fired For Building Your Personal Brand," it's dated October 19, 2009 and it's by Dan Schawbel, who is "the Managing Partner of Millennial Branding LLC, is a world renowned personal branding expert. He is the international bestselling author of *Me 2.0*, and the publisher of the Personal Branding Blog." If you believe in personal branding as a healthy or necessary activity, you may already subscribe to his blog—and you're probably not reading this anyway, or doing so only to sneer at my Luddite lack of enthusiasm for treating self as corporation.

In this case, Schawbel's focusing on what you probably shouldn't do if you're currently employed and want to stay that way.

> I view web 2.0 technologies at the driving force that converges our professional and social lives. Who you are and how you behave outside of work can impact how you're perceived inside of work and visa versa. The way the world works now is that you have to spend more time thinking about your actions than you did ten years ago because words spread faster and they are accessible by everyone.

The ten ways, without the sometimes-lengthy commentaries?

1. Friending your manager on Facebook and then complaining about your job.
2. Putting your personal brand in front of your company's brand.
3. Complaining that your company blocks social networking sites.
4. Attracting the wrong attention to your company's brand because of your own.
5. Announcing your new job on Twitter when you're still employed.
6. Thinking you're superior to older workers because you're tech literate.
7. Wearing rags to work because it's part of your brand.
8. Posting inappropriate photos on Facebook, forgetting that your profile is public.
9. Spending more time on yourself than being productive during work hours.
10. Calling in sick, when you're not, so that you can focus on your brand.

I gotta love #9. I guess as long as 60% of your work hours go toward your (current) employer, you're OK. Otherwise…well, this all seems to boil down to "If you're working for someone else, you might try to be as little of a douchebag as a 'personal brand' builder can be." Schawbel closes by saying three times that you should use common sense—but, in my worldview, if you had common sense you'd drop the "personal brand" nonsense anyway.

The Middle

Not Quite Dead Yet

The headline in Steve Fox's "TechLog" in the October 2011 *PC World* is actually "Desktop Software: Not Dead Yet" and the callout is "Cloud-based applications may be receiving all the attention, but we still can't live without locally installed software."

Setting aside "we" as an exaggeration—well, maybe not for *PC World* readers—and "can't live without" as perhaps slightly exaggerated, it's still a good editorial. Not that *PC World* doesn't care about cloud apps; the same issue has an article on cloud-based office suites. But I'm inclined to

agree that "if convenience, utility, and performance—as opposed to glitz—are your criteria, local software is hard to beat."

His six reasons are access (some of us aren't *always* online), self-determination (it's easier to personalize desktop software—and it's typically not possible to postpone updates for online software), trust, versatility, suitability to the task and speed. The paragraph on each is worth reading; I'll just quote one that bothers me a *lot* when it comes to overreliance on the cloud:

> Trust: Web apps know a lot about you. They might even hang on to your data. You may trust them, but what happens if they go out of business or are acquired by someone less scrupulous?

If you've never had an online application or service disappear from under you, you're lucky. In any case, I agree: "let's hold off on the obituaries for client-side software. There's still plenty of life left in those old bones." As can be said for most things for which deathwatches run rampant.

But Sometimes…

That same editorial column in the December 2011 *PC World* points to the annual "100 best products" feature—and discusses "tech losers." As Steve Fox notes, some things that technically ended in 2011 were effectively gone years earlier (yes, AltaVista is *officially* dead now) and "it's hard to get too choked up over their official expiration." But there are cases where genuine regret may be appropriate: "good products lost in the ferocious market of 2011; initiatives that became too expensive to continue funding; even well-engineered gear that never fully caught on with the public." Here's his list of seven "tech goners that we at *PC World* are truly going to miss" with my own comments.

- Flip camcorders. Pure Digital pioneered the field. He blames the shutdown on the sale to Cisco and "the rise of video-capable smartphones"; that might be true, or it might be that Cisco just wasn't very good at retail mass marketing.
- Verizon's unlimited-data plan. There are still no-limit plans, but yes, at $10 per gigabyte per overage…well, you'd better really *love* that movie you're watching on the small screen.
- The white MacBook. I don't get this one at all; Fox mostly seems to hate the possibility that Apple will phase out white products.
- HP WebOS. Did it ever really gain acceptance?
- Symbios. Remember Symbios? Nokia used it (and probably still does on some phones), so Nokia's move to Windows mobile versions killed it.
- Zune HD. Well…I appreciate Fox's "two reactions," with a "(few) faithful who deemed the Zune superior to the iPod" upset and most people being surprised that Microsoft was still producing it.

But, y'know, Steve, there were and are other excellent portable players, especially for those of us not in the iCamp. Sandisk still produces excellent, well-priced players under the Sansa name, including the Clip+ and the Fuze+, although it's discontinued the neat little Express, the overgrown flash drive I used to use. (I'm delighted with my 8GB Fuze—and since it's from Sansa, I can always expand it with a microSDHC card from them or some other actual flashRAM manufacturer.

Or is the Desktop Dead After All?

The editorial that began this little essay appeared in the October 2011 *PC World*—but Melissa J. Perenson's "Let the Tablet Revolution Begin" in the April 2011 is one of those single-minded deathwatch-oriented pieces that admits no doubt: Steve Fox may be the magazine's editor, but since we're entering the "post-PC era" desktop software *must* be dead.

Perenson says "the tablet is fast becoming today's PC"—not tomorrow's, not "for some," but it's pretty much a done deal. The first sentence: "The tablet computer will *undoubtedly* revolutionize computing, and 2011 may be year one of this uprising." (Emphasis added.) She uses that pat phrase "post-PC era" three times in a short story. Why are we on a "march to a post-PC era"? Because combined notebook and desktop sales are falling rapidly? Nope; not true. Because tablets now outsell, say, netbooks, much less notebooks and desktops? Nope; not true. It's true *because it's true*. The facts have nothing to do with it.

Smarter, Dumber or Both?

Remember the controversy in 2010 over whether the Internet was making us dumber (Nick Carr's route to bestsellerdom) or smarter (Clay Shirky's ongoing notion and, ahem, route to betsellerdom)? In a June 6, 2010 piece at *GigaOm*, Mathew Ingram discusses the controversy—although his conclusion is foreshadowed by the title of the piece: "Is the Internet Making Us Smarter or Dumber? Yes."

Ingram says the reader might find something worthwhile in both viewpoints and both of them are right. Since I've always found both perspectives singularly dumb and since my favorite answer to multiple-choice questions is "yes," I'm predisposed to appreciate Ingram's perspective here. His brief summary of each argument is interesting. Specifically, Shirky's apparent overall thesis (undermined by his bad statistics—e.g., maybe watching less TV would provide a huge "cognitive surplus," but while Americans may be watching less *network* TV, we—and the rest of the world—are actually watching *more* TV overall, most of it even stupider than network TV) isn't that the Internet makes you or

me or Carr or Ingram smarter, but that it makes *society* smarter, whatever that might mean. I think we can look at the current electoral debates for some indication of the quality of that particular claim. If this is smarter, I shudder to think what dumber might be.

I have been reading Carr's blog, and one of his underlying claims is that the Internet makes us "less interesting" whether or not it makes us dumber. I believe that's true for Carr: His blog has become steadily less interesting over time. He thinks it's because we won't contemplate as often. I think it's pretty clear that Nick Carr is becoming more distracted by ephemeral things; I'm less convinced that Carr is the Universe. But I'll quote a key paragraph in Ingram's essay:

> Anyone who has spent much time on the Internet—especially using tools such as Twitter or any *other social media outlet—can probably sympathize with Carr's comments about how he has felt himself becoming more distracted by ephemeral things, more stressed, less deep. And the idea that multitasking is inherently impossible is also an attractive one. But are these things making us dumber, or are they simply challenging us to become smarter in new ways? I would argue they are doing both. To the extent that we want to use them to become more intelligent, they are doing so; but the very same tools can just as easily be used to become dumber and less informed, just as television can, or the telephone or any other technology, including books.

Damned if I can find much to disagree with in that paragraph.

Ingram asks readers what they think—resulting in 23 comments. On one hand, they're a much politer group of comments than you see on too many sites (the relatively small number may have something to do with that). On the other, there's not a lot of new insight. Two or three of them are just brief snark, or in one case the apparent inability to actually *read* a commentary (the most recent one, responding to "Smarter or dumber?—I think the answer is yes" with "That doesn't make much sense to me"). Several make essentially the same point, that the internet is not homogeneous and can make some people smarter and other people dumber, much like the local library (an analogy explicitly used once). A couple point out that it was ever thus: That rock'n'roll was making us dumber after TV started making us dumber after radio started making us dumber after cheap books started making us dumber. One person takes a cheap shot at Carr—"Nick carr is full of shit. What he says is basically 21th century luddism." and another takes a cheap shot at Shirky—"Shirky is a self-serving virtual boulivardier.." Both Carr and Shirky deserve better.

Closing the Digital Frontier

According to Michael Hirschorn's article of that name in the July/August 2010 *Atlantic Magazine*, the "era of the Web browser's dominance is coming to a close." Why? Because "things are changing all over again."

> The shift of the digital frontier from the Web, where the browser ruled supreme, to the smart phone, where the app and the pricing plan now hold sway, signals a radical shift from openness to a degree of closed-ness that would have been remarkable even before 1995. In the U.S., there are only three major cell-phone networks, a handful of smart-phone makers, and just one Apple, a company that has spent the entire Internet era fighting the idea of open (as anyone who has tried to move legally purchased digital downloads among devices can attest). As far back as the '80s, when Apple launched the desktop-publishing revolution, the company has always made the case that the bourgeois comforts of an artfully constructed end-to-end solution, despite its limits, were superior to the freedom and danger of the digital badlands.

So we have one of those "shifty" articles—where we *all* move from one paradigm to another paradigm, with no room for both, for people who use smartphones, apps and iPads *but also* notebooks and browsers.

But as I read it, this doesn't seem to be as much about the web in general as it is about traditional media and their relationship to the web. Even there, I think the thesis is overstated—and with an odd countergenerational overtone: "for under-30s whelped on free content, the prospect of paying hundreds or thousands of dollars yearly for print, audio, and video (on expensive new devices that require paying AT&T $30 a month) is not going to be an easy sell." But, Hirschorn says, that won't stop "the rush to apps" because, especially with Apple as semi-benevolent overlord, "there's too much potential upside."

I find the article bemusing. We learn that Twitter barely cares about, well, *Twitter*—that the smartphone version is more fully featured. It's clearly an "or" situation: Apps can only rise *at the expense of* the browser. The grand finale? Harking back to the American frontier, Hirschorn concludes:

> Now, instead of farmers versus ranchers, we have Apple versus Google. In retrospect, for all the talk of an unencumbered sphere, of a unified planetary soul, the colonization and exploitation of the Web was a foregone conclusion. The only question now is who will own it.

As Sue Kamm has said in another context, "In the words of the immortal Nero Wolfe, 'Pfui.'" It doesn't help to read the byline: Hirschorn runs a TV production company. I suspect, particularly based on rereading the article, that he views the world in media terms: There are producers and consumers, and that's just the way it is.

Relatively few comments over the past year, the first of which rushes to Apple's defense—followed by one that posits that, you know, people can and probably will use both "walled gardens" and the open web. A few items down, we get a reasonably sound comment that begins with this subtle paragraph: "This is absolute rubbish."

I'll quote Dale Dietrich's comment in full (typos and all—and since Dietrich was probably typing on a virtual keyboard, an occasional typo's forgivable), as I think it speaks to the truth if you're dealing with something more than corporate media:

> The app does NOT diminish the importance of the browser. The app merely extends the web to more devices that it was hitherto inaccessible to. The App, as first popularized on the iPhone, wrested contol of what can be done on mobile devices from big telco to the individual. Like the browser-based web did before it, the app gave control to the end user. The author would do well to consider that all modern smart phones include browsers that are heavily used both independenty by users and by mobile apps that frequently embed the browser within the app. Case in point, I am viewing and responding to this silly article within the Safari browser that is embedded within my iPad's Twitterific app. Hell, Twitter-based apps INCREASE my viewing of browser-based content by curating the web for me by the trusted folks I follow.

And, a bit later, this from David McGavock:

> All of this assumes that the people who are participating in the read-write-create web will walk away and let apps dominate all their interactions. This dichotomy of apps vs. browser seems false to me in light of the fact that both have their strengths and weaknesses. This entire article assumes that the billions of people that are creating their own digital footprints will give it up for paid service. There is an explosion of legal sharing going on here. Are we all going to pack it up and go home because of the apps we use. I think not.

Then there's a strange comment from "John_LeB" who apparently is aware of something I'm not:

> It is true that some information remains free on the Web, but much research-based scholarship definitely does not. With on-line fee-based jobbers such as Taylor & Francis, Elsevier, Blackwell, Springer, etc., research that used to be freely distributed on the Web now carries a subscription fee. All well and good, perhaps; academic researchers are entitled to compensation for their scholarly production—but wait! Access fees rarely trickle down to their producing authors. Their reward lies in the "points" they can embed in their CVs for tenure or promotion. The jobbers are running free with the pecuniary revenue. One unfortunate spin-off is that access to research is foreclosed where it's needed the most, in the developing world where the contemporary price of a journal article can represent a week's worth of food. (Food for the stomach, that is.)

Ah, the good old days when research articles were always freely distributed on the web, back before those young upstarts like Elsevier grabbed it all… That's the complete comment. The writer's probably as ignorant of open access as he is of the history of web access to research articles.

Mike Masnick does a pretty fair fisking of Hirschorn's article in "Another Journalist Seduced By App Madness Predicts The End of the Web," posted July 1, 2010 at *techdirt*. I won't bother to excerpt his commentary: It's free and you can go read it yourself, unless you're reading this on a smartphone that lacks any form of browser (a combination that seems somewhere between unlikely and impossible). Of course, if your *only access* to e-stuff is through such a smartphone or some truly locked down tablet, then you're not reading this anyway, are you? (Oddly, in comments on Masnick's piece, Hirschorn objects that his piece is "largely an attack on Apple's efforts to curtail that freedom…"—which, if true, means that Hirschorn is an inarticulate writer, since I certainly didn't read it that way. Even in this response, Hirschorn's an Only One Future man: "Also clearly and obviously, the rise of mobile computing will result in less non-mobile-computing and the center of power will move from the browser to the smartphone/ipad experience." Right. And neither smartphones nor tablets have browsers. Now, if Apple had a browser—oh, let's give it some fanciful name like Safari—that would *really* change the inevitable future. But that's as silly as it would be for Amazon to add a browser, say one with an even sillier name like Silk, to its walled-garden Kindle Fire.)

If you do read Masnick's piece, scroll through at least some of the comments. Hirschorn starts doing a complex "that's not what I was intending/that's not what I really wrote" dance that leads me more and more to believe that he really is inarticulate or incoherent. As you probably already know, I'm definitely not one of those who regard traditional journalism and media as irrelevant (as some commenters do)—but neither do I regard them as the whole of the landscape.

Why mention this now, almost two years later? Because we haven't gone All Apps, All The Time. Because traditional real-world media continues to do better than a lot of digital junkies realize (for example, did'ja know that there are more than 300 million print magazine subscriptions in the US, and that 100 million people in the US still read print newspapers? hmm?). Because the world continues to evolve mostly in "and not or" ways, with *more* choices complementing one another rather than One Triumphant Paradigm…and because this sort of "journalism" continues to be prevalent.

"Good Implementation of a Bad Idea"

Here's one that would have been in "Interesting & Peculiar Products" if that section still existed: the Acer Iconia 6120, reviewed in the July 2011 *PC*

World. An $1,199 14" laptop with one big difference: Instead of a physical keyboard on the bottom half, it has a second 14" multitouch capacitive screen.

As a laptop without that hot feature, it's simply overpriced for a first-generation Core i5-480M CPU, integrated graphics, 4GB of RAM and a 640GB 5,400RPM (notebook speed) hard disk. Those specifications for a 14" notebook sound like a $500 unit to me—or at least Gateway (which is Acer with a different label) would sell such a notebook for around $450-$550. (I'm writing this in February 2012; maybe in July 2011 it would have been more like $650-$700.) So figure you're paying at least $400 to $600 for that second screen and multitouch capability. That's not quite right: The unit also lacks an optical drive, making it significantly underpowered except as a thin-and-light notebook—neither of which it is.

The reviewer found that typing on the screen was slower and less accurate than on a physical keypad. Otherwise, well, the touch-sensitive control hub and applications worked as advertised, but "using them on a lower touchscreen doesn't save much time or effort." Additionally, the second touchscreen makes the unit bulky (1.4" thick, for a unit with no optical drive) and heavy (6lb., again with no optical drive)—and makes for short battery life. "It's good to see Acer trying designs as aesthetically pleasing as the Iconia's, but as a practical matter it simply doesn't make sense to replace the lower deck of a laptop with a touchscreen."

An Interesting "Great Gifts" List

The December 2011 *Sound and Vision* devoted 10.5 editorial pages to "Expert's Guide to Great Gifts 2011"—which is interesting partly because the 84-page issue only has 39 editorial pages (some of which are full-page pictures), partly because none of these gifts appear to have been tested or formally reviewed. There are no ratings as such, just informal, subjective commentary. (If you think 10.5 pages out of 39 is a lot, that's followed by another 3.5 pages of DVD/Blu-Ray/CD box sets; it's effectively 15 pages, or more than a third of the issue.)

So what's sure-fire? There's a $499 iPod dock from Monitor Audio; some headphones ($300 professional 'phones, $120 over-the-ear noise-canceling phones from Audio-Technica rather than Bose), the strange $60 SRS Labs iWow 3D, a plug-in for iStuff that claims to give expansive sound quality.

One of the most interesting, in a slightly strange way, is the $2,490 Magnepan Mini Maggie Desktop Speaker System—for people who want really good sound on really big desks, since the two desktop speakers are each 14" tall and 9.5" wide (and 1.5" thick). (The subwoofer's 22.5" x 19.25", and since it's only 1.5" thick, I trust it has one heck of a deep and stable base if there's a cat in the house.) You'd need a pretty good

receiver as well: These aren't self-powered speakers and they're relatively insensitive. (If you're wondering: You can't hang those big speakers on the wall; Maggies require a fair amount of space behind the speaker in order to function properly.)

I'm certainly not making fun of all these. The Audio-Technica headphones look like winners, for example, as does the $249 Blue Microphones Yeti Pro USB Microphone for people wanting high-quality stereo recording in a simple home environment. The point of the $349 Nuforce Icon-2 Integrated Desktop Amplifier seems to be compactness, and the $300 NAD DAC 1 Wireless USB DAC—well, if you understand that product name, you may have an idea why you might want it.

I find a touch of silly season in the $149 Gunnar Premium 3D Glasses, which are intended for use in movie theaters or with passive 3DTV, not the active 3D sets you've probably heard about (with the expensive glasses). They look like regular glasses; I suspect they'll work over existing regular glasses even worse than others, but hey… I'm also a little uncertain about the $300 iHome iW1 AirPlay wireless speaker system—I mean, just how much sound are you going to get out of two 3" speakers *powered by a lithium-ion battery?* The writeup says 13 watts per side, and if that's anywhere near right, you can plan on recharging that battery a *lot*.

There are a couple more, culminating in the $500 Vivitek QUMI LED pocket projector, a teeny-tiny "HD" projector (it doesn't project full 1080P HD). It's not a true pocket projector—it's AC powered and a little too big—and it's pretty dim if you actually want a large picture, and the speakers provide "audible, but just barely" sound. It sure does look like a neat toy, though.

The whole effort strikes me as odd, but I'm not in charge of putting out a mass-circulation magazine with as little editorial effort as possible. If somebody wanted to buy me anything from this list, I'd probably take the Audo-Technica 'phones. (My computer desk is enormous, but there is no way I could situate that speaker system so it would work properly. Nor, for that matter, would I want to.)

In Praise of Libraries

Once upon a time (in October 2007), futurist Richard Watson—the only futurist whose blog (*What's Next: Top Trends*) I follow—did an extinction time line. I thought it was massively silly for the reasons most deathwatches are silly, but I don't remember commenting on it. (Finding it now, I see in the post leading to the PDF timeline itself that he calls it "in part a bit of fun" and clarifies that "extinction" doesn't *mean* extinction; it means relative rarity. Thus, by Watson's standards, Macs have been extinct for a very long time and LPs, despite increasing sales, continue to be extinct. The timeline actually says "existence insignificant beyond this date.")

One item struck me as particularly outrageous: He included libraries with an extinction date of 2019, a couple of years after retirement and a year before copyright. As to overall veracity, he has landline telephones extinct by 2011 and newspaper delivery extinct by 2012; there are at least 100 million Americans who would disagree on both counts. Worse, libraries didn't even get boldface: it was one of the minor notes, apparently not worth much thought.

In late 2011—apparently earlier in the year but repeated on December 28—he posted an essay with the title above, taking back the prediction for *public* libraries and librarians. Portions:

> Some time ago I created an extinction timeline, because I believe that the future is as much about things we're familiar with disappearing as it is about new things being invented. And, of course, I put libraries on the extinction timeline because, in an age of e-books and Google who needs them.
>
> Big mistake. Especially when one day you make a presentation to a room full of librarians and show them the extinction timeline. I got roughly the same reaction as I got from a Belgian after he noticed that I'd put his country down as expired by 2025.
>
> Fortunately most librarians have a sense of humour, as well as keen eyesight, so I ended up developing some scenarios for the future of public libraries and I now repent. I got it totally wrong. Probably. [Emphasis added.]

I emphasized that sentence—even with the qualifier—because it's so astonishing for any futurist, even a semi-skeptical one. *He got it wrong*, and he's admitting it. Sort of.

> Whether or not we will want libraries in the future I cannot say, but I can categorically state we will need them, because libraries aren't just about the books they contain. Moreover, it is a big mistake, in my view, to confuse the future of books or publishing with the future of public libraries. They are not the same thing.

I would interject here that Watson *still* seems to think that books, or at least print books, are largely irrelevant for the future. Given that he seems to take most of his futurism lightly, maybe that's OK. Revisiting (and seemingly accepting) the notion that we don't need libraries when you "can download any book in 60-seconds…or instantly search for any fact, image or utterance on Google" he answers his own question as to "why bother with a dusty local library?" [What makes local libraries "dusty"? Well, he's still a futurist…]

> I'd say the answer to this is that public libraries are important because of a word that's been largely ignored or forgotten and that word is Public. Public libraries are about more than mere facts, information or 'content'. Public libraries are places where local people and ideas come together.

> They are spaces, local gathering places, where people exchange knowledge, wisdom, insight and, most importantly of all, human dignity.
>
> A good local library is not just about borrowing books or storing physical artefacts. It is where individuals become card-carrying members of a local community. They are places where people give as well as receive. Public libraries are keystones delivering the building blocks of social cohesion, especially for the very young and the very old. They are where individuals come to sit quietly and think, free from the distractions of our digital age. They are where people come to ask for help in finding things, especially themselves. And the fact that they largely do this for nothing is nothing short of a miracle.

There's quite a bit more—this is a fairly long post—and it's not a bad discussion. More of the good stuff before Watson starts going all "inevitable digitization" on us.

> In a world cluttered with too much instant opinion we need good librarians more than ever. Not just to find a popular book, but to recommend an obscure or original one. Not only to find events but to invent them. The internet can do this too, of course, but it can't look you in the eye and smile gently whilst it does it. And in a world that's becoming faster, noisier, more virtual and more connected, I think we need the slowness, quietness, physical presence and disconnection that libraries provide, even if all we end up doing in one is using a free computer.
>
> Public libraries are about access and equality. They are open to all and do not judge a book by its cover any more than they judge a readers worth by the clothes they wear. They are one of the few free public spaces that we have left and they are among the most valuable, sometimes because of the things they contain, but more usually because of what they don't.
>
> What libraries do contain, and should continue to contain in my view, includes mother and toddler reading groups, computer classes for seniors, language lessons for recently arrived immigrants, family history workshops and shelter for the homeless and the abused. Equally, libraries should continue to work alongside local schools, local prisons and local hospitals and provide access to a wide range of e-services, especially for people with mental or physical disabilities.
>
> In short, if libraries cease to exist, we will have to re-invent them.

I could push at some other items in the essay, but I'm mostly astonished by "I was wrong" and by a futurist recognizing that public libraries *matter*—for far more than books, although I continue to say that the books will continue to matter.

For some reason, Brian Kelly of UKOLN seems intent on the doom of books in his comment:

> Reading your post it strikes me that you're not really saying your prediction was incorrect – you are simply redefining a public library as a community space. You seem to still believe that the public library as a

> place for borrowing books is doomed. Is this not the case? And whilst I agree that public libraries will need to change in order to respond to that new challenges of the digital age, I know that others will argue that public libraries are fundamentally about physical books, and your suggestion that libraries will be reinvented is simply saying that public libraries, in their current form, are doomed. Yes?

There's no response. I certainly read that comment as being from "others"—that Kelly is himself arguing that public libraries *as such* are properly doomed. There's not a word in the post (that I could find) implying that public libraries have no future as book-lending places, only that they're much more than that.

Caring for Your Introvert

The nice thing about THE MIDDLE as a section name is that, even more so than TRENDS & QUICK TAKES, it can be about almost anything—basically, anything that's not about C&I or my books [THE FRONT] or mostly snark [THE BACK]. I could see the possibility of C&I issues consisting of nothing but those three sections…and they might be some of the most interesting or best-read issues.

Take Jonathan Rauch's lovely piece, "Caring for Your Introvert," and the followup provided starting with the online posting of an article that apparently originally appeared in the March 2003 print version of *The Atlantic*. I tagged the article in June 2010, and didn't realize it was seven years old. Nor does that much matter.

> Do you know someone who needs hours alone every day? Who loves quiet conversations about feelings or ideas, and can give a dynamite presentation to a big audience, but seems awkward in groups and maladroit at small talk? Who has to be dragged to parties and then needs the rest of the day to recuperate? Who growls or scowls or grunts or winces when accosted with pleasantries by people who are just trying to be nice?
>
> If so, do you tell this person he is "too serious," or ask if he is okay? Regard him as aloof, arrogant, rude? Redouble your efforts to draw him out?
>
> If you answered yes to these questions, chances are that you have an introvert on your hands—and that you aren't caring for him properly.

I go on hikes on most Wednesday mornings with a great group of people, most of them even older than I am. After the hikes, a few of them go to a local brewpub for lunch and a beer. I've never joined them. Instead, I go home, change clothes, and go out to eat. By myself. With a science fiction magazine to read. (In fact, so far I've never tried the First Street Alehouse, even though it's supposed to have the best burger in town.)

Why don't I join them, other than preferring fresh clothes after a sweaty hike? Simple: After two to four hours, I'm pretty much socialed

out. I need some time to recuperate. And, sure enough, for years I had trouble with my manager at work because I wasn't going around chatting with other people enough, I wasn't at enough of the casual events, I was…too serious.

My name is Walt and I'm an introvert. I've given some pretty good presentations. I can and will talk about most anything. I was even president of an ALA division. But I'm still an introvert.

> Science has learned a good deal in recent years about the habits and requirements of introverts. It has even learned, by means of brain scans, that introverts process information differently from other people (I am not making this up). If you are behind the curve on this important matter, be reassured that you are not alone. Introverts may be common, but they are also among the most misunderstood and aggrieved groups in America, possibly the world.

[Yes, *of course* Rauch follows that by using the same xA "My name is Y and I'm an x" cliché I just used. Some things just seem natural.]

It's a charming article (although portions are overstated, presumably for humor), one that I think could only have been written by an introvert. I call myself shy, but that's only partly true (true back in dating days, true enough at most big parties)—but I'm not "anxious or frightened or self-excoriating in social settings"; I'm just not a hale fellow well met.

I won't quote the paragraph starting "Are introverts misunderstood" because I don't want to exceed fair use, but boy, do I agree with it. "Extroverts have little or no grasp of introversion. They assume that company, especially their own, is always welcome. They cannot imagine why someone would need to be alone; indeed, they often take umbrage at the suggestion." On the other hand, I'm not willing to claim oppression. Do I believe I would have made more money, been more successful and probably dated a lot more if I'd been an extrovert? Absolutely. Do I regret being an introvert? No—and in any case, I doubt that it's any more of a conscious choice than, say, sexual orientation. In both cases, you can fight against your nature, you can probably *appear* to be what you're not—but you'll damage yourself in the process.

The online version of the article has 626 comments as of this writing. I did not attempt to read all of them. (The discussion continues: Since the website uses Disqus, I could go to newest-first, and the most recent comment is only three days old. That's remarkable.) Some comments from extroverts are remarkably hateful (and some have been removed from the thread), but most of what I read was reasonably coherent.

The followup is a deliberate attempt at "introversy"—controversy among introverts. Specifically, it raises the question "In looking for a mate, are introverts better off pairing up with extroverts or with fellow

introverts?" As you can probably guess, my own answer is Yes. The piece is segments of email responses to the question. An interesting lot. I find it telling that one response (from an extroverted woman married to an introverted man) includes this sentence: "On the other hand, my poor husband is a classic, closet introvert." Your *poor* husband? Hmmm… And, come to think of it, the next one—from "an extrovert with lots of introvert friends"—refers to introverts, or at least some of us, as "petulant."

The internet: Everything you ever need to know

That's a startlingly arrogant title, and I'm willing to believe that John Naughton didn't actually choose it for this June 19, 2010 essay at *The Guardian*. Not that Naughton isn't ambitious: He claims to offer *the* "nine key steps to understanding the most powerful tool of our age—and where it's taking us."

I was a little put off by the introduction, but then remembered that I live in Northern California and Naughton is writing for a British newspaper. For example, he seems to think that most "mainstream media" coverage of the internet is negative:

> It may be essential for our kids' education, they concede, but it's riddled with online predators, seeking children to "groom" for abuse. Google is supposedly "making us stupid" and shattering our concentration into the bargain. It's also allegedly leading to an epidemic of plagiarism. File sharing is destroying music, online news is killing newspapers, and Amazon is killing bookshops. The network is making a mockery of legal injunctions and the web is full of lies, distortions and half-truths. Social networking fuels the growth of vindictive "flash mobs" which ambush innocent columnists such as Jan Moir. And so on.

Around here, at least, most of the "mainstream" media coverage I see related to the internet is positive and far more nuanced. But then, most folks around here treat the internet as infrastructure: by itself, the internet is neither good nor evil, nor really much of anything. (Naughton seems to find this appalling: "The internet has quietly infiltrated our lives, and yet we seem to be remarkably unreflective about it. That's not because we're short of information about the network; on the contrary, we're awash with the stuff. It's just that we don't know what it all means.") Naughton's arguing for a "more balanced view of the net"—which, after reading the essay, I'll translate to "a far more net-centric and worshipful view."

So Naughton concludes that we need "a smallish number of big ideas" to properly ~~understand appreciate~~ worship the internet. He comes up with nine because it's the outer limit of "seven plus or minus two" and thus a magic number.

What are the nine big ideas that will tell us "everything we ever need to know" about the internet? Without the lengthy discussions, they are: Take the long view; the web isn't the net; disruption is a feature, not a bug; think ecology, not economics; complexity is the new reality (a discussion that would be more convincing if Naughton accepted the complexity that existing analog media and systems are likely to complement digital systems—but that's not the complexity of which he writes); the network is now the computer; the web is changing; Huxley and Orwell are the bookends of our future; our intellectual property regime is no longer fit for purpose.

Do these "big ideas" tell you all you need to know about the internet? Not to me, not even after reading the complete discussions. I find one of them positively startling in its oversimplification, bad history and handwaves. Here's probably the shortest discussion of the nine, the entirety of "the web is changing":

> Once upon a time, the web was merely a publication medium, in which publishers (professional or amateur) uploaded passive web pages to servers. For many people in the media business, that's still their mental model of the web. But in fact, the web has gone through at least three phases of evolution – from the original web 1.0, to the web 2.0 of "small pieces, loosely joined" (social networking, mashups, webmail, and so on) and is now heading towards some kind of web 3.0 – a global platform based on Tim Berners-Lee's idea of the 'semantic web' in which web pages will contain enough metadata about their content to enable software to make informed judgements about their relevance and function. If we are to understand the web as it is, rather than as it once was, we need more realistic mental models of it. Above all, we need to remember that it's no longer just a publication medium.

There's *so much* wrong with that "in fact"—about the simplicity of the early days, about the reality of today, and about the likelihood that the semantic web will conquer all—that I don't know where to begin. Here's what we need to remember: the web was never one medium and it never will be.

I'll give Naughton credit: After overpromising in the introduction, he does add a postscript:

> It would be ridiculous to pretend that these nine ideas encapsulate everything that there is to be known about the net. But they do provide a framework for seeing the phenomenon "in the round", as it were, and might even serve as an antidote to the fevered extrapolation that often passes for commentary on developments in cyberspace. The sad fact is that if there is a "truth" about the internet, it's rather prosaic: to almost every big question about the network's long-term implications the only rational answer is the one famously given by Mao Zedong's foreign minister, Zhou

> Enlai, when asked about the significance of the French Revolution: "It's too early to say." It is.

It's hard to argue with the last part of that paragraph. At the time, Naughton was working on a book about "the internet phenomenon"—now *there's* a shocker. I would assume that book is *From Gutenberg to Zuckerberg : what you really need to know about the Internet*. For all I know, it may be a very good book.

Falsehoods Programmers Believe About Names

This one's just plain neat, speaking as a former systems analyst/designer/programmer. It's by Patrick McKenzie, posted June 17, 2010 at *Kalzumeus*. It begins (emphasis in original):

> John Graham-Cumming wrote an article today complaining about how a computer system he was working with described his last name as having invalid characters. It of course does not, because anything someone tells you is their name is—by definition—an appropriate identifier for them. John was understandably vexed about this situation, and he has every right to be, because names are central to our identities, virtually by definition.

McKenzie worked as a programmer for several years in Japan and has worked with "Big Freaking Enterprises," and says he's "never seen a computer system which handles names properly and doubt one exists, anywhere." He offers 40 false assumptions about names (some of them variations of others). I'd happily quote the entire list, but, well, copyright… A few of them:

> 6. People's names fit within a certain defined amount of space.
>
> 10. People's names are written in any single character set.
>
> 11. People's names are all mapped in Unicode code points.
>
> 14. People's names sometimes have prefixes or suffixes, but you can safely ignore those.
>
> 15. People's names do not contain numbers.
>
> 18. People's names have an order to them. Picking any ordering scheme will automatically result in consistent ordering among all systems, as long as both use the same ordering scheme for the same name.
>
> 19. People's first names and last names are, by necessity, different.
>
> 31. I can safely assume that this dictionary of bad words contains no people's names in it.
>
> 37. Two different systems containing data about the same person will use the same name for that person.
>
> 39. People whose names break my system are weird outliers. They should have had solid, acceptable names, like 田中太郎.
>
> 40. People have names.

Go read the list. Especially if you're a programmer who designs data entry forms. Especially if those forms "validate" names. (My systems, of course, *never* had problems along those lines. Never ever. And I am the King of Livermore.)

Bits & Pieces

The August 2011 *PC World* includes a full review of a retail Chromebook—that is, one that's for sale, not handed out free by Google. It's a Series 5 from Samsung and costs $499 with Wi-Fi and 3G support ($429 for Wi-Fi only). It comes with a 12.1" screen, runs an Intel Atom CPU, has a 16GB solid-state drive and 2GB RAM. There is a Webcam. It's fast to boot—but it's as slow as a netbook and considerably heavier (3.3lb.) and more expensive. You're limited to a Chrome browser for all your applications (there's a media player and file browser, but the review describes them as "so badly designed and feature-poor that they are practically unusable"). Oh, and there's just the one window—after all, you're always in Chrome. Period. The review is negative enough that the 2.5-star rating seems generous.

- Do cleanup utilities actually speed up your PC? That's the question asked in an August 2011 *PC World* article, using four Windows optimizers (CCleaner, System Mechanic, System Speedup and WinOptimizer 7) on "cluttered old PCs"—ones that had been in use for years without any cleanup. The overall answer: No. None of the utilities made much difference—and some utilities resulted in *slower* response after being run. On an old Dell notebook running Windows XP Professional with 1GB RAM, *every* optimizer seemed to do more harm than good. They did, by and large, speed up boot time—but not by much. Conclusion? "You might feel better after running a utility—but judging from our testing, your PC's overall performance is unlikely to change much."
- The April 2011 *PC World* looks at three "wireless chargers" in a comparison that is much less fervent than previous stuff I've seen about electricity *through the air*, although even this one wholly fails to deal with actual efficiency issues. The writer calls this—charging mobile devices wirelessly using power mats—"cool and convenient" but says "the technology still has some maturing to do." I suppose it's convenient to add a sleeve or something to each of your mobile devices, plug in a new flat charging mat, and set the mobile devices *directly on the mat* (since that's the only way reasonably efficient inductive charging can work), as opposed to, you know, plugging the devices directly into chargers. I'm not sure

just how that's true, but I don't have dozens of mobile devices constantly requiring charging. Maybe the sleeves and other add-ons don't get lost as readily as chargers do? (One of the systems doesn't even use inductive charging: It's a sheet with metal strips that contact other metal strips on adapters, "but the mat is engineered so that it's safe to touch.") Indeed, despite the callout saying this is "cool and convenient," the article concludes "it's not more convenient"—and it certainly adds a new set of costs.

- The June 13, 2010 *Chronicle of Higher Education* has a Jeffrey R. Young essay, "The Souls of the Machine," that's mostly extolling Clay Shirky and his supposed Internet revolution—you know, how we're all going to use huge quantities of excess creative energy because we don't watch TV as much, and that creative energy combined with chaos will work wonders and disrupt industries. I marked it for some fact-based rebuttal (we're *not* watching less TV as a society, just less broadcast-network TV; many of us really use TV for relaxation and wouldn't transfer that energy to creative pursuits; if social networks are the prime example of "creativity," I don't find the results all that convincing…and so on). But after seeing Shirky's way of responding to critics (he dismisses them as being wrong, asserting that his facts are the real facts, as any proper Guru would, I guess) and the tone of the discussion, I guess this falls into the "life's too short, and oversimplifying gurus who select their 'facts' carefully will always win, once they have a platform" category. Heaven knows, Shirky's still spouting his stuff, still getting huge book sales and probably fat speaking fees…and TV viewing time continues to increase. If someone wants to tell me that billions of hours watching YouTube *in addition to* professional video entertainment somehow count toward societally positive creativity, well…I tend to disagree.
- I've written before about being wrong, and how astonishing (and refreshing) it is when a public figure, especially a guru, admits that they've been wrong. I flagged "Hoodoos, Hedge Funds, and Alibis: Victor Niederhoffer on Being Wrong" because of that. It's by Kathryn Schulz and appeared June 21, 2010 at *Slate*. But what I think I was really tagging was "The Wrong Stuff: What it Means to Make Mistakes," a series of discussions with various people who will admit to having been wrong. This particular example is a hedge-fund manager who was spectacularly wrong twice. Others include James Bagian (an astronaut turned patient safety expert). Once you're at any specific discussion, you can page to previous or

next discussions. You might enjoy the "exit interview" noting some dead people Schulz would have loved to interview; you may find a number of the interviews worth reading. You may find some—Chuck Colson?—incredibly self-serving. It appears that the series ends in December 2010. Worth checking out.

The Back

Notes from the 1%

Home theater is frequently a topic fraught with blue-sky economics of the "if you have to ask, you can't afford it" variety. I've noticed that *Home Theater* magazine and its ilk tend to avoid associating price tags with anything other than specific components—and, as with most audio magazines, power consumption apparently isn't on the radar at all.

Which makes it all the more astonishing when claims of universality arise—when some new and wonderful thing is touted as something *everybody* needs. Take, for example, "Control4 Home Theater and Home Automation System Part 2" by Darryl Wilkinson in the May 2011 *Home Theater*. It's about whole-house automation—as in Wilkinson's desire: "I want to be able to use that same remote to turn the lights on and off, lock and unlick doors, raise and lower shades, and, well, anything else I can think of." The article is about how close this Control4 system does or doesn't come to that ideal.

Wilkinson is truly geeky about this stuff. For example, ever since he had motorized window shades installed, "I can't resist pressing the button and watching the shades go quietly up and down whenever I pass the keypad. Sometimes, I use the Web app to make the shades move while I'm away. It's terribly addictive, and before you think I'm crazy, I'm not the only person I know who says this." But he's unhappy: Those dumb shades "don't communicate their up/down status back to the Control4 system." After all, you're (apparently) not actually *using* the room where you're raising or lowering shades, so you can't, um, *look at them*. What fun would that be?

Anyway, after going through lots of hype on this stuff—how you can buy a bunch of used iPads for controls (that's plural: you *really need* at least one universal control pad in each room, and probably more than that) if the dedicated controls are too expensive—and studiously avoiding any mention of total costs for automating everything or what I regard as a non-trivial factor, namely what I suspect is a fairly large parasitic electricity usage load from having all of these remotely-controlled devices all over the house—we get to the final paragraph:

> Control4's COO, Glen Mella, told me that one of the company's goals is to turn home automation/multiroom audio from one of those things that's

> nice to have into a gotta-have. I think they've hit the bull's-eye. Once you've lived with a Control4 system, regardless of its scale and options, you'll wonder how you ever called your house a home without it.

Right. It takes a heap of circuitry to make a house a home.

For another helping of this, there's a long, wildly enthusiastic review of a competing system, the Lutron RadioRA 2 Home Control System, in the November 2011 *Home Theater*. This system costs $17,000; it's a *lighting* control system handling up to 200 devices; and the heading claims that it "saves electricity and lengthens bulb life"—I guess because you can use motion sensors to turn bulbs off when nobody's moving around in a room. (Anyone had the joy of a motion-sensor-controlled bulb in their office and having to wave your arms every so often so the lights stay on?) *Of course* there are no figures comparing probable reduction in electricity with the *increased* electricity use required to have all of these receivers, all of which have to have *some* continuous power.

You can pretty much predict the writer's conclusion as to the worth of this $17,000 add-on: "Unfortunately, you're not going to be able to put in a RadioRA 2 system on the cheap. But what it will do for you in terms of changing the way you live in your home will far outshine the amount of money you spend." Wow. I'm trying to think of how much I'd have to value every time I flip a switch on or off, or my wife does the same, to make $17,000 extra (plus more electricity when we're not using anything) worthwhile. Nope, sorry, doesn't compute.

Throwaway Commodities

Oh, look, here's the October 2011 *Sound & Vision* and John Sciacca's "The Custom Installer" column. As soon as you say "custom installer," we're nearing 1% territory (and, to be sure, it's assumed that a Control4 system would be installed by a custom installer), but Sciacca makes it a little clearer in the opening paragraph:

> Prices for flat-panel TVs have been reduced to a level where they've essentially become throwaway commodities. Just the other day, a customer informed me that he was going to put a TV outside on his deck and "leave it there until it breaks, then I'll just buy another one." [Emphasis in the original.]

A *good* large-screen HDTV still costs $1,000 to $3,000. Calling them throwaway commodities is a pretty good indication of people who light their cigars with $10 bills—and that astonishing quoted sentence is worse. (After all, only ordinary folks would consider, say, Freecycle for the HDTV they've gotten bored with.)

It's Cool…

Another example, this time from the up-front pages of the August 2011 *Home Theater* (it's probably worth noting that both *Home Theater* and

Sound & Vision are big-circulation, dirt-cheap-subscription, ad-heavy magazines, not prestigious high-class operations): A two-thirds page rave writeup of the Dan D'Agostino Momentum Amplifier. I'll quote the first paragraph:

> OK, it's not intended for home theater per se, and you'll need five of these monoblocks, at a cost of $21,000 each, to fill out a basic surround system. But with its irresistibly modern-retro Dodge/Chrysler-meets-Phase Linear aesthetics, you couldn't have enough of these stunning beauties populating your rack.

That's right. It's a single-channel solid-state amplifier for $21,000 a pop. This isn't a review, so it's just repeating the manufacturer's claims as to its power and quality. But hey, what's $21,000 *per channel* to a 1%er?

You're Not Charging Enough!

Here's an amusing sidenote, if you're easily amused: John Atkinson's "As We See It" column in the April 2011 *Stereophile*. He discusses the Consumer Electronics Show, the financial problems of the American middle class, the "extraordinarily large number of very expensive loudspeakers" he saw at the 2011 show (by "very expensive" he means more than $100,000 for a stereo pair) and the extent to which stereo is becoming a 1% field (he doesn't use that term), that is, strictly a luxury operation for rich people.

Here's the incident. Magnepan, a respected manufacturer of unusual and apparently excellent loudspeakers, introduced its new *flagship* model—at $5,495 to $8,495 a pair.

> Pleased at finally encountering a new speaker in Las Vegas whose purchase *didn't* require the sale of a middle-class audiophile's kidney, I congratulated Magnepan's Wendell Diller on the price, and offered the opinion that it must have been welcomed by dealers. To my surprise, he told me that the opposite was the case: Many Magnepan dealers felt that the MG3.7 should have been priced higher, perhaps at as much as $10,000/pair.

Diller expanded on this in a later email: He literally pushed back at distributors and dealers asking Magnepan to charge more. The company builds its speakers in America. It has an excellent reputation. "We have an adequate profit margin." He told his dealers "Sell more." Some responded that a higher price wouldn't hurt sales. Of course, compared to $100,000 a pair, $10,000 is chump change. (The column is also a way of *not* apologizing for that issue's cover featuring two speaker systems favorably discussed in the issue: the Wharfedale Diamond 10.1 and PSB Alpha B1. The prices of which are, respectively, $350 and $279. A pair.)

The Low and the High

This might be a good place to do something I haven't done in a while: Sum up the low and high end of basic stereo systems with components good enough for *Stereophile*'s "Recommended Components" list, this time the April 2011 installment.

Let's assume two varieties of stereo system (and that it's stereo, not surround): One that just plays CDs and one that also plays LPs.

Inexpensive Options

While the *Stereophile* list includes a $25 used Sony Playstation 1, let's go one step higher to the $349.99 Marantz CD5004. Similarly, although the cheapest receiver in the list is $378, that's for a unit that puts out only 3.5 watts, so let's choose the $449.99 Marantz PM5004—and look, we have a matching system. Actually, you could skip the receiver entirely and buy the $199 Audioengine 2, self-powered speakers, but they're really only for desktops and very small rooms, so let's move up to the PSB Alpha B1 at $279/pair. I suspect you'll use ordinary cables for this system, but you could spring for a $262 Kimber Hero interconnect and $11.99 for 50 feet of RadioShack 16-Gauge speaker cable (yes, it's on the list).

Want LPs? Add $369 for a Pro-Ject Debut III—which includes a tonearm and an Ortofon cartridge. If your stereo receiver doesn't have a phono stage, add $129 for an NAD PP 2.

This isn't a dirt-cheap system (a "CDeiver" would bring the price down even further), but it's not terrible: $1,352.97 for CDs, $1,850.97 for CDs and LPs. For a system *every component of which* is recommended by a high-end magazine.

More Expensive Options

To play your CDs, the $79,996 dCS Scarlatti gets things off to a good start. Add $29,500 for a darTZeel NHB-18NS preamp. A pair of mbl Reference 9007 monoblock amplifiers will set you back $35,423 (*Stereophile* hadn't tested the $42,000/pair Dan D'Agostinos yet). Turns out you'll need *two* pairs of monoblocks (or maybe four pairs), since the $156,200 Cabasse La Sphere speaker (that's for a pair, at least) *requires* four amplifiers. You'll also need cables, say two sets of TARA Labs The Zero (one from the CD player to the preamp, another from preamp to amp) at $15,900 each. Since you need two sets of speaker cables (or do you need four sets?), double the $8,499 price of JPS Labs Aluminata.

If you need LPs, add $149,995 (*not $150,000!*) for the Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn (which includes tonearm) and $15,000 for a Koetsu Coralstone Platinum Mono (for your precious old monaural records) and $11,990 for a ZYX R-1000 Sigma 2-X for stereo. Figure another $60,000

for a Vitus Audio MP-P201 phono preamp, and another $31,800 for two more TARA Labs cables.

How much does this come to (understanding that this is also only two-channel and that you could spend a *lot* more money)? $417,140 for CDs, $685,925 if you want to play LPs as well. That's less than 371 times as much as the inexpensive system. I'm 100% certain that it would sound a *lot* better. I'm guessing most of us could hear the difference, even if you increased the low-end speaker budget to, say, $1,199 for a pair of full-range PSB Image T6 speakers (brings the total to $2,770.97, or about 0.4% of the price of the high-priced spread). How many of us would find the difference worth paying 300 times as much? For 99% of us, the answer's irrelevant: We couldn't, wouldn't put half a megabuck into a stereo system under any circumstances.

I seem to remember a time in which some audio writers assumed that you'd spend more on your CDs (or LPs or both) than you would on your sound system. Back in the bad old days, I spent more money than I could really afford on some moderately expensive stereo equipment and hundreds of LPs. Right now? My music system is a Sansa Fuze and folding Sennheiser PX100 headphones. The total runs to $130, I think. If I start to have actual income again, I might upgrade—say to Grado SR60 headphones at around $80.

Faith Beats Fact Every Time

As I write this, Doonesbury's wrapping up a week at "myFACTS," a service that supplies "facts" to back up whatever worldview someone wishes to support. But who really needs that when you have writers being as straightforward as Michael Fremer in his introduction to a review of a turntable in the May 2011 *Stereophile*. He admits that no turntable—not even his favorite $150,000 turntable (see above)—"can produce CD's accuracy of speed and inherent freedom from wow and flutter." Then we get the statement of faith—and now it's clear that it *is* a statement of faith:

> Despite that, you'll never convince me that CDs produce music that sounds better or more lifelike than LPs, or that CDs even come close to communicating music's ability to *evoke* emotions from listeners, or the sensation that you've been transported to the concert hall, or that the musicians are in your room performing for you. They just don't.

He goes on to say that if you play the best CDs for an hour, "then play an LP on even a modestly priced turntable, and the sensations of quiet, relaxation, and relief are profound." Not just for him, but for anybody with ears.

What turntable was he reviewing? Does it really matter, since apparently even the modest ones are *so much better* than the best CD equipment that they instantly produce "sensations of quiet, relaxation, and

relief"? We're talking *faith* here, especially in that long quoted sentence. (It's a $7,990—not eight thousand, but a mere $7,990—turntable, although you'll need to add a tonearm [$3,990 gets you a matching one], probably a record clamp and better platter [$1,500], a cartridge [$2,700], so it's *really* more like $15,000 and up. If you have to ask…)

Ho-Hum Percolator

Sometimes magazine items are just plain weird. Take Rachel Z. Arndt's enthusiastic review of the Jura Impressa J9 One Touch TFT coffeemaker in the November 2011 *Fast Company*. Here's the sentence that felt like it came from Never-Never Land or the early 1970s:

> Just push a button and your order is ready with the Jura Impressa J9 One Touch TFT, an espresso maker as powerful as those helping baristas crank out lattes, yet as easy to use as that ho-hum percolator you're used to.

Say what? Raise your hands if you're using a percolator to brew coffee. Hmm. Not seeing many hands out there. How many of you have used a percolator in the last, say, two decades—or even *seen* one in that time? Remember Max Pax?

If you're still using a percolator, you'd definitely get better coffee by stepping up to a more modern coffeemaker, almost any modern coffeemaker. You might not need the device being touted here, although it's a mere $2,800. No, there's no missing decimal point.

Perfect Sound For…For…For…

The "App of the Month" for November 2011's *Home Theater Magazine* is Color Monkey VinylLove Pocket. It costs $1.99 for the iPad, $0.99 for the iPhone or iPod touch—I guess only iDevices can apply. It turns an iTunes collection into a set of album covers in alphabetized bins that you can flip through. Once you select an album, a turntable appears on screen with the record on it (although the label's generic, not an actual rendition—which would be *neat*!). You can move the arm and all that.

But here's the killer, and as a sometimes skeptic of the claim that vinyl has it all over CDs, I'd *love* to see this app being used (but with uncompressed FLAC or AIFF files, not MP3) in a setting where the golden-eared audiophile didn't know whether this device was playing digital files through a high-end audio system or whether they were hearing LPs through the same system. Namely, "the app adds a fine layer of random crackling to your music to simulate the equivalent surface noise of a slightly worn uncleaned record."

That wouldn't work. There should be a setting that adds the surface noise of a *perfectly-cleaned* record, at an appropriate level. For those who believe that some of vinyl's "more natural" sound is euphonic distortion,

part of it being that "ambient sound" of low-level surface noise, such blind testing could be revealing.

On the other hand, the app sounds like fun, but I'd probably get tired of that obvious crackling in about 90 seconds.

Loving Your Readers (Or Hating Everybody Else?)

I'm frequently bemused by comments by magazine and newspaper writers that appear *intended* to offend a substantial portion of their possible readership—but also appear to be asides.

Take, for example, a brief item "HDTVs Connected, Viewers Not" in the up-front section of the November 2011 *Home Theater*—a section of brief notes on products and trends, most of them unsigned. Herewith, the first three of seven sentences that make up the full item:

> Connected HDTVs nestle snugly in two out of five American households, reports Knowledge Networks. Yet viewers are strikingly old-fashioned in their viewing habits. A fanatically old-fashioned 47 percent still prefer to watch programs at their regularly scheduled times versus the 23 percent who favor DVR recordings. [Emphasis added.]

"Fanatically old-fashioned"? Other than a middle finger salute to those of us who watch shows when they air (and keep ad-supported networks in business), what's the point of that nasty little remark?

Of course, there's another disconnect in the sentence: Apparently, 30% of those with HDTVs or connected HDTVs just sit and stare at the boxes showing nothing, since no third option is given.

When Dominance Isn't

It's always refreshing when a writer admits an error—even if they fudge a little bit. Robert Strohmeyer had written an article in *PC World* saying, among other things, "Conventional wisdom states that Google's Gmail…won the battle for e-mail dominance long ago."

In the April 2011 *PC World* letters column, a correspondent called him on it, noting figures (from sources unknown) that show Outlook (pre-2007) having 23% of the email client market, Hotmail 16%, Yahoo 14%, Outlook 2007 8% and iPhone 3.0 7%--and Gmail 5%. "Just because Google gets the geek love doesn't mean it's number one."

For *consumer* email, I suspect Yahoo's share is much larger and Outlook's share is much smaller, but I wouldn't be surprised if Gmail still trailed some of the others. (If you add up some of his numbers, it shows Microsoft as having 47% of the email market. Including corporate installations, I suspect that's right.)

The response wasn't *quite* an admission of error: "It was probably a poor word choice on my part when I said 'dominance.' I hadn't intended to

suggest that Gmail was the most popular e-mail service, but that among informed geeks it's top-of-mind."

Good to know that "dominance" no longer implies #1 market share or anything close to it. It's a geek's world, and those are the opinions that matter.

Fillers

There have been times when I've suspected magazines of having included certain items, or lengthened certain stories, just to fill out a page.

That is, of course, a cardinal sin. No reputable newspaper or magazine should ever do such a thing, just as no reputable fiction writer has ever padded a novelette-length idea out to a novella or novel, or expanded a novel's worth of plot into a trilogy (especially a fantasy trilogy).

Certainly, I would never do such a thing. To insert a largely meaningless final item on the last page of a *Cites & Insights* issue in order to avoid a half-column of white space (or the need to cut 1¾ pages of copy) would be most unfortunate.

Masthead

Cites & Insights: Crawford at Large, Volume 12, Number 2, Whole # 146, ISSN 1534-0937, a journal of libraries, policy, technology and media, is written and produced irregularly by Walt Crawford. This is the special Online PDF version.

Comments should be sent to waltcrawford@gmail.com.

URL: citesandinsights.info/civ12i2on.pdf