Libraries

Public Library Closures:
On Not Dropping Like Flies

For those who don't have the patience for a long, rambling essay with lots of background and detail, here's the tip of the pyramid:

As far as I can tell, at most seventeen public libraries within the United States closed in 2008 or 2009 and have apparently not reopened as of March 2012. That's 17 out of 9,299 (in 2009) or 9,284 (in 2008) or 0.2%.

With the exception of one bookmobile (operating as a reporting library, not a mobile branch of another library) potentially serving 15,656 people, the closed libraries were *very* small. Fourteen of them served fewer than 1,000 people (that's the Legal Service Area, the *potential* number of patrons); the other two served 1,000 to 2,499 people. Of the fourteen, for that matter, nine served fewer than 350 people—and five served 200 or fewer. The closed libraries accounted for 0.002% of 2007 library circulation—less than one of every 49,000 circulations. In other words, nearly all of the libraries closing in 2008 and 2009 (and all of the brick-and-mortar libraries) were *very* small libraries serving *very* few people. (Note the difference: 0.2% of libraries—with 0.002% of circulation, two orders of magnitude smaller.) Did these libraries close because the communities had emptied out to the point where no community services could remain? That's a tougher question; we'll look at the communities later on.

Inside This Issue

Why does this matter? I'll get to that—and to why these figures may be different than some you've heard, read or assumed. The answer is not that I'm trying to make everything in public libraryland seem rosy. It is

that I believe it behooves librarians to know what they're talking about—that even more than in most fields, they have a responsibility to know the facts behind their assertions.

Background

On November 25, 2011, I posted "How many US public libraries have actually closed?" on *Walt at Random*. That post includes my reason for asking the question and some additional details, so I'll include the whole thing here:

> When reading various posts and articles from various directions–some celebrating the promised end of public libraries, most bemoaning the decline of public libraries–I keep running into comments about so many public library closures.
>
> Which got me to wondering: How many public libraries have actually closed permanently in the last year or decade?
>
> Let's be more specific: How many library agencies, defined as libraries that report statistics to their state library and/or IMLS, have shut down with no expectation of reopening, or have been closed two or more years?
>
> One percent of the 9,000-odd library agencies in the US? Five percent? Half of one percent?
>
> I can't find good info at ALA. In fact, when I go looking for library closures, I see some surprising ambiguities. For example, you have the wifty claim that 15 states reported closure of "fewer than two" library outlets last year. Problematic on two counts: In what world is "fewer than two" anything other than one (unless it's zero)–and what's an outlet?
>
> Going back a little, I see ALA press releases on the subject of the closure of the library in Colton, California in November 2009. Which is a tragedy–except that the Colton library was reopened within a year.
>
> I didn't find good info at IMLS [Institute of Museum and Library Services] either, although maybe I didn't know where to look.
>
>> I'm certainly not trying to minimize budgetary problems. I know lots of branches have been shut down or had hours reduced; I also know that some libraries quite appropriately close some branches for the sake of the health of the library system as a whole.
>> (Where I live, two small branches are only open a couple of days a week, if that–but the result is that the main library, in a relatively compact city, has robust seven-day-a-week operating hours. Would we be better off if all three locations had reduced hours or no book budgets? Not in my opinion–but then, I'm closest to the main anyway. And I'm aware that one of the two branches is in a part of town where huge construction plans didn't work out very well…)
>
> I think the question deserves an honest answer because the assumption that libraries are closing like crazy hurts libraries–it makes it easier for

those who don't like public libraries to suggest that they're anachronisms in any case.

Maybe there should even be two more refinements:

How many public library agencies have closed in towns/cities that are still themselves viable communities? (If a town's lost its schools, its businesses, its post office because nobody really lives there any more, the library's likely to go as well…)

How many public library agencies have opened in the last year or decade? Do library closures exceed new library openings?

If someone can point me to an authoritative and reliable source, I'd be pleased.

It is at least partly the case that I didn't know *how* to look, at least for the last bullet there. You can impute the number of library openings by comparing different years of the IMLS database—and, since 2008, you can determine the libraries that are *reported* as closed, although not whether they've stayed closed. At the time, I hadn't figured out how to open the massive IMLS Access databases without Access (which I don't own) or how to parse the flat files. Since then, I've figured out how to open the databases in Excel—and, thanks to some commenters, I had a better idea where to look.

Last Things First

Let's get those last two questions out of the way first. At the moment, the most recent IMLS report is for 2009 (the 2010 report will be out this spring). Ignoring libraries that didn't report open hours, all of which either are reported as closed or are libraries within a U.S. territory (primarily Puerto Rico), there are 9,257 public libraries in the 2009 database. (That's a little higher than the 9,184 I use in my forthcoming book, a number taken from HAPLR reports; HAPLR excludes a small number of libraries that do incomplete reporting to IMLS.)

The 1999 IMLS database (for public library agencies, not branches) has 9,048 rows. So if you ignore all the mergers and other changes, there were 209 more libraries in 2009 than in 1999—*after* all closures are taken into account (the 2009 figure is for libraries that report open hours and circulation). The actual number could be slightly higher or slightly lower, given that different libraries sometimes merge into a single system (at which point there's a central agency and more than one outlet or branch) *and* branches of a system sometimes break off as independent libraries. Let's say "roughly 200"—which isn't a lot (a little more than 2% net growth), but is still a positive number: There have almost certainly been more public library openings than closures in the past decade.

Comments on the Post

I received two well-informed comments (and responded to both). Dr. Steve Matthews, who writes the *21ˢᵗ Century Library Blog*, had this to say:

> Good questions. I tried to address this issue last March (Library Closure Numbers Are Not Too Bad), but found the same issues—no current numbers. Being at a state library, I understand the annual reporting system, but still, it seems that something this important should have more in-depth and current data attention. What I was able to guesstimate was 0.4% fewer libraries since 2005.

Linking through to Matthews' post, he notes the slow but steady increase in the number of public libraries as reported by IMLS (running through 2008, and his numbers are slightly different from mine), then notes:

> But we know through media and professional channels that many libraries have closed in the past two years. [Emphasis in original.]

In June 2010, Karen Muller addressed the question "How many closings?" for ALA, but did not actually answer the question. She wrote for ASK the ala librarian: Q&A from the ALA Headquarters Library, that; "The most reliable count of the number of public library service outlets comes from the annual IMLS Public Library Survey,

> So, we in the ALA Library consulted our colleagues in the ALA Office for Research and Statistics (ORS), who said:
>
> As you can imagine from a data standpoint, the number of closed libraries is a swiftly moving target. Even the announcements of potential closures in Charlotte, Philadelphia, Reno and Boston sometimes change from week to week as many library advocates stand up for keeping their branches open—often ultimately leading to reduced hours rather than complete closures.
>
> The most recent information we have from the Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study (PLFTAS) was gathered during the fall of 2009, and the news has certainly gotten worse since then. At that time, 13 state library agencies reported they were aware of library closures in their states due to budget issues. Twelve states reported it was fewer than five, with Indiana reporting between 5-10 closures of branches.

Matthews takes this data and extrapolates to "an average of two libraries per state" (yield 24) "and a conservative six for Indiana," coming up with "at least 30 library closings by the fall of 2009." He then estimates another 30 closings in 2010. Why? Because 2010 was "probably the worst year for libraries in recent memory." So he comes up with 60 libraries closed since the 2008 IMLS report, thus yielding "99.6% as many libraries as existed five years ago."

Except, except… Indiana reported *branch* closures, not *library* closures. There's no reason to assume an average of two—or that those two were libraries, not branches. And these numbers don't take into account

temporary closures: Libraries that shut down and then reopen a year or two (or three) later.

Matthews finds the numbers encouraging:

> Not to minimize in any way the loss for the staff and communities of those library closures, but that is not actually too bad on an industry-wide scale. I'm certain many businesses lost much more than that in outlets and chain stores in the past five years. There certainly are lots of empty businesses in my city, and no doubt in virtually everyone's city.

> What's my point? My point is, why shouldn't somebody report these numbers? Why act like it's a terrible secret that can't be spoken? I actually think these numbers of library closures are encouraging. Libraries could be doing much worse, all things considered.

> Why not let the profession know that on the whole libraries are doing better than most businesses during this economic crisis? Everybody knows libraries have closed—some especially tragic closures too.

> But, the good news is that (*in spite of still largely offering 20th Century services to 21st Century clients*) libraries as institutions are doing OK. [Emphasis in original.]

"Everybody knows libraries have closed"—much as "we know…that many libraries have closed." But are these libraries actually closed? Have they remained closed? (I won't get into the whole "20th century services to 21st century clients" issue: That's one where I suspect I disagree with Dr. Matthews, but it's a different topic.) I certainly agree with the penultimate paragraph—and it's worth noting ALA's solidly, consistently alarmist pose. I believe ALA ORS *could* have a legitimate count of closed and reopened libraries, and frankly fault it for not having one, one that distinguishes between branches and systems.

Michael Golrick also commented—but focused on library outlets, that is, branches (of which there are more than 16,000). I was and am focused on administrative entities, because the closure of outlets within a system is so much more complex than the failure of an administrative entity. Golrick notes the problem with reporting closures even at the state level—and that IMLS is now gathering some additional data. That's true; since 2008, actually, IMLS has been a reasonable source for library closings.

How many public libraries have closed? Redux

This followup post appeared on January 25, 2012 at *Walt at Random*. I note that I hadn't received actual answers and that "I asked the question again recently in a comment grumping about the lead sentence of a LISNews story, a sentence beginning "In an age of library closings":

> Since you lead with that, I'll repeat the question I've asked elsewhere (with no results): Do you–does anyone–have any actual data on actual library system closings? Not branches, not temporary shutdowns, but public

libraries that actually disappear–or, let's say, shut down for at least three years?

Has it been 1% over the last 10 years? 0.5%? 0.1%?

Have there been more public libraries (again, not branches–those are inherently more temporary) closed or opened over the last decade?

Or do we just conveniently talk about lots of library closures, despite lack of any real evidence that this is happening? I'm not trying to minimize the effects of branch "closures" or reduced hours, but I'd sure like to see some facts…

I was particularly frustrated because the *LISNews* story was about a brand-new public library: A library opening. I found the negative lead unfortunate, albeit typical. Although, as it happens, the new Topanga Library is (ahem) a branch—part of the County of Los Angeles Public Library, one of the largest public library systems in the nation, serving more than four million people.

My comment became a separate post. Blake Carver responded with a list of "closures"—all of which, as far as I can tell, were branch reductions, not library system closures. That list numbered four or five incidents over five or six years. Here's Carver's basis for the negativity consistently displayed at LISNews:

As someone who scans maybe 100 stories about libraries a day I'd say the general trend is 90% terrible for budgets as reported in local newspapers. I don't know that there is a huge wave of closings though. It wouldn't surprise me if there was one coming though. (Note: Huge Wave could mean numbers closer to 20, not 2,000).

Carver also rejects my attempt to distinguish between library systems and branches. Indeed, the comments on that post seemed to go in all sorts of directions, none of which answered what I originally thought was a simple question. (I won't cite and discuss those comments—this piece is too long as it is!)

The remainder of the January post briefly discussed why I was focusing on library systems/agencies, not branches, and why (at the time) I was unable to use IMLS data (a problem I've since resolved). The key paragraphs

Note that, in this question and elsewhere, I'm asking about libraries and library agencies–not individual branches. That is, I'm working off the 9,000+ number (closer to 9,200), not the 16,000+ number.

Why? Because branches come and go as part of how cities change. Yes, the temporary or permanent loss of a branch affects those served by it, but it's of a different nature than the shutdown of an entire public library system. (Library branches also appear more easily than full library systems…):

At that point, I knew enough to know one partial answer: "The net number appears to be negative." That is, more libraries opened over a

decade than closed. So I focused again on the narrower question and on why I care:

> My question still stands: How many public libraries (not branches) have actually closed for extended periods, let's say two years or more? How many of these are in towns and cities that have not become ghost towns?
>
> Yes, there are budgetary problems. (When aren't there?) Yes, public libraries need more funding.
>
> But to me the primary effect of the "public libraries are closing all over the place!" meme is self-fulfilling prophecy and grist for the mill of libertarians and those who dislike public libraries: Oh well, they're already shutting down like crazy, that's just the way it is.
>
> Which, as I suspected, is simply not true.

A statement that I'll stand behind—both that it's not true and that it's a dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy.

The only comment on that post came from Will Robinson:

> I live in Columbia, South Carolina and although the economy is one of the worst in the nation our libraries have stayed open. People depend on so many of their services, especially when unemployment is this high, that I think there might be a revolt if services were cut. I think around the country the urban libraries have been hit hardest. Detroit closed four branches if I remember. Here is an issue brief from ALA.

As I noted, to the extent that the ALA brief is about library closings at all, it's about *branches* closing, not *libraries* closing:

> For example, given changes in Detroit's population, is it possible that it simply makes sense to have fewer branches open longer hours? (Just asking, not assuming.) That's why I'm focusing on libraries (administrative agencies) rather than branches.

It's mostly about decreased hours, staffing cuts and other very real budget issues, none of which I either deny or regard as unimportant—although, frankly, given the depth of loss of public *funds* during the recession, one really needs to ask whether public libraries are faring worse than other public agencies, not just whether they're suffering. (Now there's a *big* research topic: Are public libraries being undersupported *compared to other public agencies*? I have no idea.)

As to whether urban libraries have been hit hardest? In terms of hours cut and staff lost, that's almost certainly true (at least based on the ALA briefing). In terms of branches closed (that complex target), probably—if only because urban libraries are more likely to be multibranch systems. But in terms of actual longterm library system shutdowns…well, see later in this article under "Apparent Closures in 2008-2009," although my introductory paragraphs give it away: *None* of the few closed library systems/independent libraries are urban.

Public Library Openings and My Problem with Negativity

This [long post on February 14, 2012](#) repeated portions of the earlier posts and added some new material—and it received ten comments (and eight more from me), including some from Bob Molyneux, one of the people I trust to state research findings clearly, honestly and without preconceived bias. That post and set of comments also lead directly to this article, even though there's another post in between.

Since much of that post is quotes from earlier posts (that already appear here), I'll leave portions of it out. I will quote a paragraph that highlights why I believe we hear so much about library (really mostly branch) closings and so little about reopenings (or new libraries):

> LISNews, for example, seems to feature any story that suggests a public library might be in danger of closing, or that some source of funding has declined, and sometimes seems to have a "we're all gonna die!" feel to it. It's not the only one, to be sure…and I've noticed that threats or temporary closures seem to get a lot more coverage than reopenings, new library openings, or threats that were overcome. I know: "If it bleeds, it leads." Journalism tends to emphasize the negative.

And my comment about Blake Carver's report that most news about public library budgets is bad news:

> A city increasing its funding for public libraries by 5% is not news; a city cutting its funding by 5% is news. Hell, look at the wave of stories and comments on the order of "OMG! California's public libraries are all gonna' close!" given the loss of somewhat less than 1% of public library funding…that is, what was left of state funding. The portion of those stories that followed the loss of $12.5 million with a note that California's public library budgets total something like $1.3 billion? I don't remember ever seeing such a story, actually…

This is the point at which I started looking at other IMLS information—the relatively brief reports IMLS does based on each year's data.

> I looked at the reports for 2009, 1999 (a 10-year gap) and, given the suggestion that 0.4% of public libraries have closed since 2004, FY2004.

> I also looked at three figures: Library agencies ("libraries"), Outlets (stationary, including branches) and Bookmobiles.

> The number of outlets can be dramatically different than the number of libraries, especially in states like California that tend toward large agencies (and has 1,122 outlets as of FY2009, but only 181 libraries).

> Here are the numbers according to IMLS, with my own totals:

Year	Libraries	Outlets	Bookmobiles	Total
2009	9,225	16,698	771	17,469
2004	9,198	16,543	825	17,368

| 1999 | 9,046 | 16,220 | 907 | 17,127 |

Do you see what I see? The 0.4% decline from 2004 to 2009…simply isn't there. The overall trend of either libraries or branches ("outlets" is libraries and branches combined) shutting down…simply isn't there.

Yes, there are fewer bookmobiles–6% fewer in 2009 than in 2004. But there are more libraries, more branches, and more total service points.

Actually, there is a number very close to 0.4% from 2004 to 2009: Namely, there are 0.58% more total service points in 2009 than in 2004. (Note that the "total" number adds Outlets and Bookmobiles, because Outlets already includes Libraries–except for those library agencies that are wholly bookmobiles.)

The 2009 IMLS report says that there are more libraries, right up front—but makes a point that the number of libraries hasn't grown as fast as the number of people. That's a much trickier discussion. Are people better served by lots and lots of very small locations or by fewer, larger, better-stocked, better-staffed locations? I don't think there's a simple answer. Nationwide, there appears to be roughly one library outlet for every 18,000 people–but that's one of those averages that is as useful as saying that a river with wide banks and a deep central channel is an average of five feet deep.

One point that surprised me a little: The IMLS definition of a library requires paid staff and public funding. Given that a number of small libraries appear to be entirely operated by volunteers, I assume they have some minimal stipend that qualifies them.

I do know that there are lots of libraries around that don't meet these definitions. A family member even operates one of them–and it's quite appropriate that it wouldn't show up in IMLS reports, as it has no public funding of any sort and doesn't pretend to be an actual public library.

Here's the rest of the post—another attempt to explain why I don't care for the "libraries are shutting down all over!" message and think it's dangerous:

My problem with negativity

I don't believe it serves the library field to repeat the false notion that American public libraries are shutting down all over the place. (Note that qualifier "American"—I really can't speak to the situation in the UK.)

For that matter, I don't believe that always stressing the negative side of library budget issues is healthy.

For what it's worth, the 2009 IMLS report does note that public library funding has grown in inflation-adjusted dollars since 1999…and the funding per capita has grown since 1999. No, it hasn't grown as much as usage, but overall, libraries were better funded at the depth of the recession than they were ten years earlier.

I think that's an important story. I think it's important that Oakland, a city with enormous budget and other problems, made a point of not cutting

library services in this year's budget–but that story doesn't show up in the library literature as much as any cut would.

I think that's a shame. Building from strength works better than trying to stave off weakness.

That's why this post's title begins "Public library openings"—because, on the whole, more libraries and branches have opened than have closed.

When I started this essay, I'd planned to cite some (of the many) librarian posts and non-librarian articles about the wholesale closing of libraries. But, frankly, after encountering one lengthy essay by a librarian who proposes that lots of public libraries *should* shut down in order to (I guess) strengthen the library field as a whole, I find the whole thing too discouraging, so I'm skipping those. If you're inclined to believe that nobody's saying either that U.S. public libraries *are* shutting down—without ever citing numbers—or, worse, that we'd be better off if many or most of them *did* shut down (which may be even worse when it comes from academic librarians than when it comes from apparently-suicidal public librarians), such accounts aren't hard to find. But let's get back to this post.

Comments

Maybe because I finally did some of my own research, maybe because "Public library openings" is such a startling contrast with most public library coverage, I got quite a range of comments. I won't note all of them, but here are some that seem relevant to this discussion. For example, this from Jeff Scott (excerpted):

I remember this topic coming up several years ago about library closings (OCLC report?) and the answer was the same. Very few libraries have closed their doors and many end up re-opening those branches [or] providing other services near the original locations shortly thereafter. There is always pressure from the public and government officials to expand library hours and branches.

There is always pressure from the public and government officials to expand library hours and branches. Not all government officials, to be sure, but Scott's stating an important point: For all the budgetary pressures impinging on libraries and government, there's pretty consistent countervailing pressure, *especially* when cuts are felt. (As Scott points out, he's one of those who *did* attempt to clarify that the loss of state funding in California did not mean defunding California public libraries, as state funding wasn't much to begin with.)

Brett Bonfield wanted to discuss more recent history—but the news stories he cited are primarily about funding issues and possible threats to libraries, *not* cases of permanently shutting down library systems. He did agree "that we're in danger of turning gloomy scenarios into self-fulfilling prophecies." He didn't think IMLS data noted openings or closings; that's

no longer true for closings, but was true until 2008. He suggested checking with COSLA; I've tried through their website, with no luck.

Amanda had this to say (excerpted slightly):

I am sick and tired of hearing doomsayers. When I decided to go into library school people kept pitying me as if when I graduated libraries would be gone. When I attended my first class, I realized libraries aren't dying. They're changing quite a bit, and because of that they are going to thrive. Now it just sounds to me that the doomsayers are just afraid of the change so people report negative news to enforce their opinions and create an inevitable situation for themselves.

We really should be focusing on changing and innovating, not flag waving at every potential branch closing. Branches can be reopened, but they won't if we just throw up our hands in defeat.

Charley Seavey offered another perspective:

Oh my goodness, real data instead of running in circles screaming that the sky is falling. Well done!

While not precisely analogous situations, this parallels in some ways the public library experience during the Great Depression. In the face of economic chaos far worse than that we presently face, American towns and cities persisted in opening new libraries. See the "The American Library and the Great Depression" article on my web page.

You might want to follow that link, to a version of a presentation Seavey gave at IFLA in 2002.

Bob Molyneaux, one of the greats of honest library research, complimented me on "An all too rare good use of data!" and offered some insights into the IMLS data and work he's done based on it. Skipping much of that (which you might want to read via the link), he notes this about library data:

In fact, the library world has a number of good series but lacks a critical mass of people who are skilled in working with data. We don't use what we have. I suspect it is easier to complain about how bad things are than work with what existing data series we have. From such work we could learn from them what we can about libraries and to improve both those libraries and the data we have on them.

There follows an exchange about data handling and fancy statistics that I enjoyed, but it's a little orthogonal to this discussion. He also looked more closely at the IMLS figures for 2009 and came to this conclusion:

* It looks like no libraries closed.

* 9,216 (99%) — of the libraries had no change in status.

* 5 (0.05%) — absorbed by another entity

* 1 merged with another entity.

* 18 "add an existing [library] or Outlet not previously reported."

Those aren't quite the numbers I came up with; I found a few closures. But Molyneux also made a more significant point. Excerpting:

> All that said, there is a larger point that we should not lose sight of. I believe you are correct that the number of library buildings has not fallen and, in fact, it looks like they have increased from what I see. However, there is an argument to be made that in some cases those buildings are being "hollowed out" to borrow a term. Use of public libraries appears to be going up from the best available evidence but there are many reports of staff layoffs and declining budgets. The data lag but public libraries in states I am familiar with are taking a major hit in funding.
>
> As a result, I don't believe all is happy in library land with the state of public libraries at least and the national-level data we have are not reflecting it. If all this is true, the buildings stand but some number have smaller staffs and aging collections so service likely would be declining. That is what I mean by "hollowed out."

I don't believe all is happy in libraryland either. My effort is to clarify one (relatively small) aspect of the overall picture. As I said in response:

> I agree that the financial situation of too many public libraries is unfortunate. I think the apparently-false notion that libraries are shutting down all over the place hurts in two ways: First, it's not true, and plays into the hands of "futurists" and libertarians who would *like* it to be true. Second, it obscures the real issues—which include the love most people have for public libraries and the lack of connection between that love (which sometimes prevents closing of branches that really should be closed) and adequate financial support for libraries to be the best they can be.

Separately, Will Kurt sent me email describing the work he's doing with IMLS data at a newish blog, *Library Data*. He looks at the other big piece of the annual IMLS dataset—the outlet report, covering 17,000+ outlets—and comes up with 101 total closings (including 51 branch closings) for 2008, 99 total (including 52 branch) for 2009. His February 27, 2012 post offers these numbers in graph form.

His tumblr blog includes a number of other discussions and graphs. I think it's worth looking at. He reviews actual library revenues and per capita revenues and expenditures and notes that revenue *has* been growing over time, even on a per capita basis using constant dollars—thus, adjusting for inflation. The growth has slowed and almost halted in recent years, but at least through 2009, it hadn't dropped. That's beyond the scope of my discussion, but I will quote one paragraph:

> After looking at public library data for a week I think it's fair to say that it is too early for a lot of doom and gloom regarding public libraries. At the same time, there are traditional library[y] services that are in rapid decline (reference), it is important the public libraries be open to change and grow to meet their users changing needs.

I commented that Kurt's figures seemed high to me—and when I went directly to the IMLS library-level figures, I found a total of 47 "closures" over two years, roughly half of what he found. But that got me even more interested in looking at whether closures are permanent or whether they later turn into library openings, even over a relatively short term.

What I Found for 2008 and 2009

For this particular pass, I looked only at library closures—not new libraries, not mergers, not branch closures. IMLS now flags such closures (and other changes in structure) in the data element STATSTRU and drops closed libraries from its database after the year in which a non-temporary closure is announced.

Filtering the 2008 and 2009 datasets (that is, pupld08av2000.mdb and pupld09av2000.mdb, *not* the corresponding puout… datasets, which list outlets rather than just library agencies) on the codes for temporary and permanent closures, I copied appropriate columns for the 47 library agencies reported as temporarily or permanently closed. (Later, I looked at the 2009 data to see how many *other* libraries didn't show any activity—that is, had zero reported hours or circulation—but weren't officially tagged as closed. There were *no such libraries* within the 50 states and District of Columbia, although there were some in Puerto Rico and other territories: libraries that simply didn't report figures.)

Then I looked at each of the libraries using word searches in Google and, later, Facebook. Of course every one of the 47 had Google results—typically more than a hundred, sometimes more than a thousand: There are dozens, maybe scores of bizarre autogenerated site systems that appear to create a web page for every library listed in IMLS and never get rid of old pages. I ignored these, looking only at pages that gave clear indication of actually being the libraries (or their communities) and having current activity.

First Cut: From 47 to 20

Nineteen libraries are *clearly* open as of late February/early March 2012, based on web activity. Four appear to have been replaced by or merged with other libraries in the same community. One is a temporary closure. Three have contemporary web activity that seems strongly indicative of libraries that are open or reopening.

That leaves 20 libraries that reported circulation in 2007, are marked as closed in either 2008 or 2009 (14 in 2008, six in 2009) and don't show clear web signs of having reopened. While it's certainly possible that some of these have reopened (possibly on a basis that doesn't qualify them for IMLS inclusion as public libraries)—especially since they're nearly all very small libraries—I'll assume for the moment that these are all libraries actually closed for at least two or three years.

Let's look at each one briefly, based on what I could find online. These libraries aren't spread evenly across 20 states. Nine are in South Dakota; three are in Alaska and two in Nebraska; the rest (one per state) are in Alabama, Kansas, Michigan, New Mexico and Utah. The bookmobile with the largest LSA is (or was) in Vermont. We'll look at the libraries by state and then by community. I'm not certain *any* of these libraries are actually closed. Some could be open but no longer meet IMLS requirements for being listed as a public library (e.g., paid staff and public funding) and others may be open but have no web presence.

Koyuk Public Library, Koyuk, Alaska

Also named Quyuk (in Iñupiaq). At last count, Koyuk has some 347 people and is growing slowly. In 2007, the library was open around 10 hours per week—but only circulated 351 items. It's still listed in HAPLR 2009, but I can find no direct web presence of any sort. The town's a little light on web presence also.

Mountain Village Public Library, Mountain Village, Alaska

Also known as Asaacarsaq (according to Wikipedia) or Asa'carsarmiut (according to the State of Alaska). Latest population estimate 835, slowly growing. According to the 2007 IMLS data, the library was open a full 40 hours a week in 2007 and had a total circulation of 2,020 items. This town's also light on web presence. I could find no library information under either name.

Ruby Community Library, Ruby, Alaska

Ruby is a gold rush town, with a population peaking at 3,000. According to Wikipedia, the town was already in decline in 1918, hit further by a ship sinking, 1929 fire and 1931 flood, and deserted after World War II, with a couple of hundred Koyukon Athabascans moving in from nearby Kokrines "to take advantage of the abandoned homes." The most recent population estimate is 173. In 2007, the library was reported as open six hours a week, circulating a total of 254 items. No current information found.

Dora Public Library, Dora, Alabama

The largest community in this list, Dora's LSA was listed as 2,413 in the 2007 IMLS database, with the library open 12 hours per week and total circulation of 2,010. While I could find no direct information, the adjacent Sumiton, Alabama (2,663 population) has a public library that was open 40 hours per week in 2007 and had a total circulation of 10,184.

Summerfield Public Library, Summerfield, Kansas

Summerfield had 211 people in the 2000 census—but was down to 156 in the 2010 census. The official website calls Summerfield "The railroad town that survived the death of the railroad" and also calls it "*the spunky little town that refuses to die*" (emphases in original)—but that site hasn't been updated since March 2003. In 2007, the library was open seven hours a week and had a total circulation of 532 items. No information on why the library closed, but the town's clearly suffering population loss.

Washtenaw County Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan

What's that you say? You're *certain* there's an operating public library in Ann Arbor—in fact, quite a prominent one? You're right. The Ann Arbor District Library serves more than 155,000 people in 2009 with an astonishing 9,172,180 circulation in 2009, up from 7,118,376 in 2007. But this is a different library agency, serving 1,808 people in 2007 with a total circulation of 1,545. The county's library for the blind and physically disabled is administered by AADL, and given that this library's 2009 newsletter says "is now administered," I believe that this is not so much a closure as an adoption by a much larger library system.

Adams Public Library, Adams, Nebraska

This community had 489 people in the 2000 census, 573 in 2010. The library was open 8 hours a week in 2007 with 3,352 total circulation. I don't find any information on the closing of the library or any replacement.

Royal Public Library, Royal, Nebraska

This library served a population of 75 people in 2007, open roughly 8 hours a week with a total circulation of 502. While the village's website still mentions the library and shows it as open seven hours a week (over three days), that page hasn't been updated since 2003. Given that the village's children now attend school in nearby Orchard, it's plausible to suspect that the Orchard Public Library may also serve Royal, but this counts as a still-closed library.

Valley Public Library, Anthony, New Mexico

This one's more mysterious than most. In 2007, IMLS shows it serving 7,904 people, open roughly 40 hours a week, with more than 8,000 circulation. The other online source I was using shows an LSA of 1,050 (which I'm using) and some 4,600 circulation—and in 2009, IMLS shows the library as permanently closing. The community itself apparently incorporated in 2010 with 561 people voting, which would seem *astonishingly* low for a place with more than 7,000 people. Community web sources do not mention a library.

Arlington Community Library, Arlington, South Dakota
Nine libraries in small South Dakota communities apparently closed in 2009. This is the first of them alphabetically and the largest, serving 944 people in 2007, when it was open just over 20 hours a week and circulated 6,578 items. The community went from 992 people in the 2000 census to 915 in the 2010 census. The only interesting information I have is that Google believes that the Harrisburg Community Library is actually in Arlington. I do note that the Harrisburg Community Library, which served 3,025 people in 2007, was open 19 hours a week and circulated 425 items, shows up in 2009 as serving 4,355 people, being open 32 hours a week and having 2,719 circulation.

Bonesteel Public Library, Bonesteel, South Dakota
Bonesteel had 297 people in the 2000 census, 275 in 2010. In 2007, the library showed an LSA of 268 people, was open roughly 20 hours per week and circulated 1,868 items. No further information available.

Canova Public Library, Canova, South Dakota
A *very* small community, Canova dropped from 140 people in the 2000 census to 105 in 2010. In 2007, the library appears as serving 125 people, open 20 hours a week—with a total circulation of 871 items. No further information is available.

Carthage Public Library. Carthage, South Dakota
Another *very* small community on the decline, going from 187 people in 2000 to 144 in 2010. The community's website—which only works properly in Internet Explorer, with type overlaying type in Firefox—says that there still is a public library, open two hours per week; that page was updated in 2011. The IMLS 2007 database shows the library open 20 hours per week and circulating 1,143 items. (That database also shows total 2007 income as $668.) This library may still be open, depending your definitions of "open" and "public library."

Delker Memorial Library, Chester, South Dakota
Chester has no web presence other than its school district; the stub Wikipedia article shows 261 people in the 2010 census, and IMLS shows 200 LSA in 2007—with the library open 20 hours per week and circulating 1,394 items. No further information available.

Evelyn Lang Public Library, Springfield, South Dakota
Wikipedia says Springfield had 1,092 people in both the 2000 and 2010 census—which, if true, is remarkable consistency (so remarkable as to be improbable). The 2007 IMLS row for Evelyn Lang shows it serving 1,516 people, open 30 hours per week and circulating 13,045 items—the highest

circulation in this group. As with other communities in South Dakota with reported-closed libraries but visible websites, Springfield has a "we're still around" motto—this time "The Best Kept Secret in South Dakota" (in a yellow text on neon-green background site that's literally painful to behold). A page on that site, apparently updated in 2012, *does* show the library as open, with new hours: 45 minutes per day three days a week, two hours on one other day and three hours on Saturday, for a total of roughly seven hours per week. There's also a Facebook page for the Springfield weekly newspaper showing library hours as recently as late 2011. I conclude that this library *is* operating in some manner.

Hecla Public Library, Hecla, South Dakota
Hecla had 314 people in 2000—and only 227 in 2010. IMLS data shows the library operating 20 hours per week in 2007 and circulating 2,070 items. No further information on the library or the community.

Java Public Library, Java, South Dakota
Java had 197 people in 2000 and 129 in 2010, which may be all that needs to be said. In 2007, the library was open 20 hours per week and circulated 1,247 items. No further information on the library or the community.

Priscilla Club Library, Corsica, South Dakota
Corsica had 644 people in 2000 and 592 in 2010—a relatively slow rate of decline. The local website shows no indication of a library. In 2007, the library was reported as being open ten hours per week and circulating 4,397 items. No further information available.

Daggett County Bookmobile Library, Duchesne, Utah
In 2007, this bookmobile is listed as serving 947 people and being open 2.5 hours a week, circulating 2,700 items—while Duchesne County Library in Duchesne served 15,701 people, was open 80 hours a week and circulated 110,221 items. In 2009, the bookmobile does not appear as a separate entity, but the library now served 16,861 people, was open 90 hours per week and circulated 143,494 items. Meanwhile, there is a Daggett County Public Library housed in the Daggett County Museum— but the museum closes between Labor Day and Memorial Day (in other words, it's only open about three months a year), and the library is shown as closed and looking for volunteers. The Daggett County website says the bookmobile service has been permanently closed.

Big Read Wagon (NCLC), Derby, Vermont
In the 2008 IMLS database, the Big Read Wagon shows as serving 15,656 people, open 40 hours per week and circulating 5,903 items. (The Dailey

Memorial Library in Derby appears serving 3,969 people, open 35 hours per week and circulating 18,103 items.) The only other evidence of this bookmobile I can find is a blog with one and only one post:

Hi,

The New Big Read Wagon Bookmobile is on the road and running great!

We had to down size from the old bookmobile because of rising cost, fuel, repairs,insurance and so forth. I'll have a complete listing of our stops for September next time.

See ya later

Bookmobile Guy

That post is dated August 15, 2008; the bookmobile apparently did not survive into 2009. Ah, but it turns out there's *another* blog, *The Big Read Wagon,* with *another* single post, this time from July 23, 2008:

The Big Read Wagon Bookmobile is a traveling library that has been serving most of Orleans and part of Essex counties in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom for the past six years. The Bookmobile provides print, audio, video and informational materials for its patrons of all ages free of charge.

But this blog also has a subtitle: "Big Read Wagon Bookmobile Dailey Memorial Library Derby Vermont." Based on that subtitle, the bookmobile was effectively (if not administratively) operating as a service of the Dailey Memorial Library. Since that library's 2009 record does not show evidence of a bookmobile, although there's an early 2009 record of the Big Read Wagon receiving a $2,500 grant. Assuming (as I must) that this bookmobile no longer operates, it represents the largest loss in 2008-2009 in terms of people no longer served.

Summing Up: The 17 Apparent Closures

All of this seems to take things down to 17 libraries (including two bookmobiles) that are apparently truly closed for at least two years, along with some others that have either been replaced, merged, or continue to be open but possibly not meet IMLS and state definitions as public libraries. These were mostly *very* small libraries:

➢ One library potentially served fewer than 100 people.

➢ Four served from 105 to 173. Four more served from 217 to 347, for a total of nine—more than half the closed libraries—serving fewer than 350 people each.

➢ Five served 573 to 945 people: A total of 14 (all but three) serving fewer than 1,000 people.

➢ Two libraries fall into the second smallest category, one serving 1,050 and one 2,413 people.

➢ Finally, one bookmobile library served a legal service area of 15,656 people.

➢ Omitting that bookmobile, the closed libraries potentially served a total of 9,073 people *as of the most recent enumeration,* out of more than 308 million in the US (or, rather, out of 308.08 million total of all LSA figures in the 2009 IMLS report). That's 0.003% of the population served by libraries (one out of every 34,000). 2007 circulation for the 17 libraries, *including* the bookmobile (6,066 circulation in 2007) was 44,798—out of a total 2,166,787,447 circulation for 2007. That's 0.002%: less than 1 of every 49,000 circulations.

Some of these libraries may, in fact, be open but flying under the radar, with no current web presence: That's not unusual for very small libraries. This is the *maximum* number of still-closed public library systems first reported closed in 2008 or 2009; the actual number may be slightly smaller.

Yes, public libraries close—sometimes because the communities they serve are emptying out, sometimes for other reasons. In all but the smallest communities, however, those closures *on a permanent basis* are vanishingly small. I don't remember that any of these libraries made the national library news: These aren't the sort of library closures that get big press. That may be unfortunate.

Notable Library Closures and Non-Closures

Here are a few supposed library closures mentioned in various sources, and what I found going online. They're in order as they appear elsewhere in the story, followed by others I found in light web searching.

The first cited "closures" in this piece are for Charlotte, Philadelphia, Reno and Boston. None of those systems is currently closed. The threatened closures were generally branches, not complete libraries. Branch closings *may* be tragic—or they may be sensible adjustments in a system's makeup as needs, funding and demographics change. (They may also be temporary: San Francisco's been closing branches to remodel or rebuild them, and that's a good thing. Now that San Jose's budget picture is improving, it's opening branches that had been built but never opened.) Let's stipulate for the moment that all of the branch closures in these cases are bad for the people and the libraries; they're still not *library closures*. Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, hit hard by the recession, closed four branches and reduced its award-winning services—but it did not close. Not even close. The Free Library of Philadelphia, with its 54 branches, did threaten complete shutdown—but that never happened, thanks to actions by the state. (Philadelphia has a recurring budgetary-crisis issue with state funding and hostile city politicians. I do note that there were far more "Philadelphia has closed / is closing / will close all / some / most of its branches" stories than "They're open again" follow-ups.) The Washoe County Library System

(Reno, Sparks and nearby areas) is operational and had been expanding over the past decade. Boston has had continuing attempts to close some number of its 27 branches; I see no evidence that the system *as a whole* was ever threatened.

What about Salinas, California, one of the most widely publicized public library system closures in early 2005? The three-branch system was indeed closed…for a while. According to the library's own active website, "The residents of Salinas formed Rally Salinas, and passed Measure V to fund all Library operations for 10 years." In 2007, the system served 149,539 people and circulated 248,813 items; in 2009, it served 152,597 people and circulated 454,489, suggesting a library on the mend. (The branches were open more than twice as many hours in 2009 as in 2007.) Of course, if you go on the web, you might conclude that this library was still closed—About.com, for example, never provided an update to an essay on Salinas' closure, and that's typical of most websites. "If it bleeds, it leads"—and if the bleeding was stopped, well, that's not really news.

As with Salinas, the shutdown of Jackson County, Oregon systems in 2007 received national publicity—for example a March 4, 2007 *San Francisco Chronicle* story "Largest library closure in U.S. looms." Jackson County's library system was primarily funded with Federal money ($7 million worth); during 2006, the library circulated 1.47 million items. Local citizens consistently failed to pass measures to pay for the libraries. In 2009, however, Jackson County Library was open with 15 branches, albeit with reduced income ($5,413,633) and slightly reduced circulation (1.42 million items). Most funding now comes from Jackson County (77%).

An article in Wikipedia, "Public library advocacy," appears to have been done as a class project. It includes a "failures" section with the introductory sentence "While many libraries benefit from advocacy many more suffer from a lack of advocacy or insufficient support." Proof of that negative statement? The section lists six cases in all, two supposedly involving library system shutdowns: Siskiyou County Library, California, and Hood River County Libraries, Oregon. As of March 2012, the Siskiyou County Library is operating in 12 locations and the Hood River County Library District (replacing Hood River County Libraries as an administrative entity) is operating all three Hood River County libraries. The article does not mention that both of these libraries have reopened (or never closed: for Siskiyou County that's not clear).

An article at *care2* from September 2011 includes the sad note that the Troy, Michigan Public Library is closing down at the end of the year (based on a pseudonymous comment on a linked story). Oddly enough, there's an active, current website for Troy Public Library in Michigan and active, current Facebook page and Twitter account, the former with more than 1,000 likes. The shutdown never happened, as far as I can tell, or at

worst has been reversed—but the original article does not mention that awkward fact.

A *Christian Science Monitor* article dated June 27, 2011 informs us in no uncertain terms that the Garden City Public Library in Michigan "closed its doors on June 17." That's cited as part of a wave of library closures based on ALA information, quoted as saying that most states were reporting library closures over the past 12 months—a claim that's been remarkably hard to follow up. Was that closure permanent or even long-lasting? Well, the Garden City Public Library website includes a calendar showing library events as early as September 2011 (and continuing through the present).

And so it goes. I could scour the first thousand or so of the remaining "2.6 million" results for "public library closures" (as a word search), most of them discussing holiday hours and other situations, but the picture begins to emerge. Yes, library systems *do* close, sometimes permanently, but it's not common, especially in communities that aren't in the process of fading away. What's consistently true: The news of threatened or actual closure travels far faster and more broadly than the news of reopening or salvation. And we're left with a continuing picture, made worse by those librarians who'd just as soon get rid of public libraries that don't meet their own standards, that libraries are shutting down left and right. It's simply not true.

LosingLibraries

This alarmist site, built by or in cooperation with *Library Journal*. which does not seem to have been updated since June 2010, has a "Link Roll" about *saving* libraries and maps for 2008, 2009 and 2010, labeled as "The Big (Awful) Picture." To maximize the downside in this deliberate view with alarm, it flags not only permanent closures but staff furloughs, budget cuts, reduced hours, statewide budget cuts and construction delays. (Looking at portions of the site other than the "big picture," there's enough evidence of Cyrillic spam to suggest that the site's been abandoned.)

Let's look at the claimed cases where "entire system is closed."

For 2008, looking at all of the hotspots yields a grand total of…zero closed systems.

For 2009, once you plow through the vibrating red dots for closed branches, the number of closed library agencies adds up to…zero. In other words, this alarmist site didn't even locate any of the small libraries that *did* close in 2008 or 2009.

For 2010—well, after fifteen minutes, the "uMapper" application still hadn't opened a map, so I'm unable to provide any information—if there's information to provide.

The sum total of lost libraries (at the system level) as reported by this dire site: Zero. Branch closures? Sure—but those are always more

complicated stories. (A huge wave of branch closures? Not as far as anybody can tell.)

Studies of Library Closures
The best (OK, the *only*) study I've located on public library closures is [Why Public Libraries Close](#), by Christie M. Koontz, Dean K. Jue and Bradley Wade Bishop, dated June 30, 2008. It looks at closures from 1999 to 2003 and includes survey work as well as some fairly painstaking comparisons of various data files that were not prepared so as to facilitate year-to-year comparisons. (I think things have gotten better in this regard with IMLS' public library datasets.) The study—which, as far as I can tell, is about library outlets rather than library agencies—identifies 99 permanent closures over four years. No list of the closed libraries appears in the PDF (it mentions an "Appendix X" but no such appendix appears), so it's impossible for me to determine how many of these 99 have since reopened. The paper's well worth reading, however, as it attempts to study why libraries (whether branches or agencies) close. For 2008 and 2009, I'm guessing that the primary reason is that the small rural communities became too nearly-abandoned or too poor to retain any library service that meets IMLS definitions—and, fortunately, that doesn't seem to happen all that often.

Public Libraries: It's Complicated

Of course many public libraries should have better funding than they do. I don't question that. (Are there overfunded public libraries? I won't touch that one.)

Of course some public libraries have had to close branches in a manner that hurts residents, and more have had to cut hours, staff and services. I don't think there's any good picture of how public libraries have fared in a recessionary period compared to other public agencies, and I think that's an important issue.

Why do I always qualify branch closings? Because they can be positive. I know of one nearby small city where the library itself was fairly well convinced that it would serve city residents better if it shut down two of its fairly large number of branches for the size of the city—but the city's residents won't let that happen. I do believe that there are some cities with too many branches, locations that can't provide adequate services and that take resources away from nearby locations that could provide more programming, better resources, better staffing.

I believe perception is important in any field, and perception *within* the field even more so. If librarians believe public libraries are shutting down like crazy, they're ill-equipped to work to build their own libraries from good to better. If politicians believe that other public libraries are

shutting down all over the place, they're less inclined to assure that their own libraries are strong.

I do plan to look at the 2010 IMLS figures and report what I find. Meanwhile, the key message is that it's simply not true that public libraries in the United States are in their death throes and shutting down.

But Wait! There's More!

While I have no Ginzu knives to sell, I do have more on this issue—thanks to Will Kurt, who continued to investigate the situation after our initial discussion. Kurt compared IMLS data from year to year, explicitly looking for libraries that are in the list in Year X and not in Year X+1. The results of those comparisons appear in "Public Library Closings—1998-2008," posted March 20, 2012 at Kurt's *Library Data* blog.

There's one graph in the relatively short post, and you should look at it directly—it has one line for "branches and central" (that is, the overall number of library outlets), one for "central only" (the libraries I've been looking at), and straight-line projections based on each of those two lines.

The results are fairly clear. Both straight lines head downward, from around 125 library and just over 200 outlet closings in 1998 to *much* smaller numbers in 2008. The actual lines aren't nearly as smooth, with big drops in 1999 and 2000 and a spike in 2001 (for libraries) or 2002 (for branches). But the message is fairly clear. Quoting Kurt:

> Confirming what Walt Crawford had mentioned in a post not long ago the state of public library closings is not actually as bleak as it seems. From the data we have it even appears as though public library closings are actually declining over time!

> I've definitely heard a lot of talk about public library closings, but, anecdotally, whenever I would investigate further I would frequently find that at the last minute plans to close were cancelled. The results above lead me to believe people threaten to close public libraries much more frequently than they actually do.

At my request, Kurt sent me lists of the apparent closings. I plan to do the same crude research on those closings (libraries only, totaling 785 over the 11 years) to see how many of the libraries are still apparently closed and haven't been replaced by branches or renamed libraries. That report will probably appear in the May 2012 issue (unless I convert it to a salable article, since *Cites & Insights* revenue continues to be $0). I haven't started the research yet, but the first reduction—eliminating actual duplicates, cases where the same library appears, reappears, and disappears again from the IMLS lists, accounts for more than 10% of the supposed closures. So right off the bat, we're down to 705 library closures over 11 years. We'll see what that boils down to. (Here's a wild-

assed guess: Somewhere between 100 and 250, probably closer to 100. I will cheerfully admit to being wrong if that turns out to be the case.)

The Middle
As Long As It Works…

Keep using it. That's a fitting intro for this episode of THE MIDDLE, another segment of catching up with old T&QT items. It's also the title of a July 11, 2010 post by K. Manilla at *Motho ke motho ka botho*. Which may require a little explanation:

> The name of this blog, which is probably why you are here, is the Setswana translation of the ubuntu precept, that "a person is a person because of ubuntu."

> Beyond that, it's probably worth mentioning that I have been a Linux user since late 2005, and started out with Ubuntu, like many other people. In fact, I still volunteer as a moderator on the Ubuntu forums.

It's a charming post, especially for a tech conservative like me. Most of it:

> Maybe it's a joke and maybe it's not, but I occasionally get notes from people reminding me that 1996 is over, and it's time to toss most of the computers I own into the rubbish bin.

> And of course, I ignore them, mostly because the people who write them are obviously juveniles (their inability to type in words longer than two or three letters is usually a clue), or just hoping for an equally acid response. But I've worked with enough trolls to know not to feed them, so those notes usually go straight to the electronic graveyard.

> The last one, just within this past day, included a link to this rather snotty article on msn.com, reminding the world that things like fax machines and CB radios — along with any sort of disk drive, which is probably why it was sent to me—are not only obsolete, but very uncool.

I don't believe I commented on that Dan Tynan article, "Ten technologies that should be extinct (but aren't)." It's a piece of work: an "if there's a digital alternative, the old technology *must go away now!*" triumphalist cry, denouncing not only telegrams and typewriters but also landlines turntables, cash registers (after all, *cash itself* is a dinosaur: Tynan says so) and disc drives (with, Gaia help me, a quote from Rob Enderle).

> At the outset, I have to warn you that I am impervious to the slur "uncool." I wear boring, uninteresting clothes to work each day that I got from boring, uninteresting sales in boring, uninteresting shops, and I did that on purpose because I have my own philosophies on cool … and they go beyond the computers I work with…

But all obvious shortcomings aside—and also acknowledging that I don't know Dan Tynan from Adam—I don't see that it matters how "old" any particular technology is, so long as you are satisfied using it to do the job. Mr. Tynan's snide comments about typewriters or turntables are completely meaningless to the people who prefer those devices, and no amount of heckling will convince them otherwise…

The bottom line is this: Mr. Tynan — or any modern tech pop writer, for that matter—can giggle all he wants about Western Union telegrams or instant cameras, but chances are the people who use those things don't really care what Mr. Tynan or his friends think. They use them because they do the job, and because they're happy with them.

And that's the way the world should work, really. I say so long as the technology works, and you're comfortable using it, then go forth and pursue happiness and freedom in any way possible. Ride a bicycle to work. Write a letter with a pen. Talk face to face with your neighbor—all those things are quite obsolete too, I should think.

The fact is, if you stop worrying about the technology you use for the job, you can spend more time focusing on the job. And if the job is anything at all that you remotely enjoy, then it won't matter to you what technology you use. And the same goes for floppy disks, which I still have lots and lots of … and use with surprising frequency.

Emphasis added, because that's the heart of the whole thing. Almost all commenters agreed—but that's not unusual.

Paperless offices—a rant

The title is on Richard Watson's July 15, 2010 post at *What's Next: Top Trends*, and it's probably included in different form in his latest futurist book. He's asserting that while paper consumption in offices increased from 1990 to 2001, it's decreased since then—and he's not sure that's a good thing. Excerpts:

Generation Y, the generation born roughly at the same time as the Personal Computer, has started working in offices and these workers are comfortable reading things on screens and storing or retrieving information digitally. Moreover, digital information can be tagged, searched and stored in more than one place so Gen Y are fully aware of the advantages of digital paper and digital filing. All well and good you might think but I'm not so sure.

One of the great advantages of paper over pixels is that paper provides greater sensory stimulus. Some studies have suggested that a lack of sensory stimulation not only leads to increased stress but that memory and thinking are also adversely affected.

For example, one study found that after two days of complete isolation, the memory capacity of volunteers had declined by 36%. More worryingly, all of the subjects became more suggestible. This was a fairly extreme study but

surely a similar principal could apply to physical offices versus virtual offices or information held on paper versus information held on computer (i.e. digital files or interactive screens actually reduce the amount of interaction with ideas).

Now I'm not suggesting that digital information can't sometimes be stimulating but I am saying that physical information (especially paper files, books, newspapers and so on) is easier on the eye. Physical paper is faster to scan and easier to annotate… Paperless offices are clearly a good idea on many levels but I wonder what the effects will be over the longer term?

Am I ready to cheer this futurist's conservative take in this case? I'm not sure. For one thing, looking at overall use of paper doesn't show whether people are using print where it's most appropriate. My own use of paper as an output medium has decreased *substantially* in the past few years, because I no longer print out articles in full if I plan to comment on them. At most, I print out the first page. I might print stuff out if I really wanted to remember it—but there's a lot of stuff, and even more in typical office life, where remembering the whole thing is pointless and possibly even harmful.

I don't think we're headed toward paperless offices. What I think we're seeing is a trend toward paper-less offices: Offices where *less* paper is used than in the past, where you only print out multipage memos and reports that you *need* to think about deeply. I don't think that's a bad thing.

Comments?

The item I tagged is a tiny little *boing boing* post on July 16, 2010—posted by Xeni Jardin, but other than three words it's all a quote from Gene Weingarten's Washington *Post* column of July 18, 2010. (How is it possible that Jardin's quoting Weingarten *two days before his column appears?* I can only guess that it's a Sunday column posted in advance on the website—that, or Jardin's psychic.) To my considerable astonishment given the way these things usually work, the link to the column still works 20 months later.

Weingarten is lamenting changes in the newspaper workplace, starting with the confusion of new job titles:

Every few days at The Washington Post, staffers get a notice like this: "Please welcome Dylan Feldman-Suarez, who will be joining the fact-integration team as a multiplatform idea triage specialist, reporting to the deputy director of word-flow management and video branding strategy. Dylan comes to us from the social media utilization division of Sikorsky Helicopters."

He liked the old way better:

On deadline, drunks with cigars wrote stories that were edited by constipated but knowledgeable people, then printed on paper by enormous machines operated by people with stupid hats and dirty faces.

Based on the good old days at the San Francisco *Chronicle*, some of us bemused readers assumed that it was the proofreaders who were drunk, not necessarily the reporters—and the quality of proofreading has actually improved over the years (at the paper, although some magazines and online sites seemed to have abandoned copyediting and proofreading entirely). Anyway, this column notes the changes when a newspaper's website enters the picture (go read it yourself: It's fun and not all that long, and it's really about headlines and how going online screws them up). What Jardin picked up on was Weingarten's quick take on online comments:

I basically like "comments," though they can seem a little jarring: spit-flecked rants that are appended to a product that at least tries for a measure of objectivity and dignity. It's as though when you order a sirloin steak, it comes with a side of maggots.

Looking at comment streams at many newspaper websites, far too many other websites, online news and other sites (I shudder to even name some of them—no, youtube's not the worst) and lots of other places, it's hard to disagree, although there are lots of exceptions.

So there's a one-paragraph *boing boing* item, all but three words of it a quote. Accompanied, of course, by the heart of it: Nearly 100 comments about comments. Jardin kicks off by saying that *boing boing* commenters aren't like that—"But anyone who's spent any time on the internet knows exactly what this guy's talking about. *boing boing* does exercise strong moderation, as does *Whatever*, a site where the comments are generally interesting and literate. In this case? Given that it's a metastream (website comments about website comments), it's fine reading, with once in a great while a semiserious point included. One of the best of those semiserious comments is by JakeGould:

The comments on most mainstream sites are dreadful. It's like someone brought a laptop to a newsstand/corner store and let every chucklehead who is waiting in line for Lotto tickets to air their opinion.

And, at the point that people were creating maggot memes, this gem by Antinous: "The plural of maggots is not data."

As to comments attached to the column itself? It's a miracle that the column's still available. Clicking on the comments link results in an animated thing saying it's going to get them…and it never does. Supposedly, they were worth reading.

The Internet Makes Us Cocky, Not Stupid

A great title for a relatively short item, by Heather Horn on July 26, 2010 at *The Atlantic*'s website. She's citing an LA *Times* article by Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons—and, oh look, a second miracle: that July 25, 2010 article is still available.

Chabris and Simons are commenting on Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows: How Internet Alarmism Is Selling Books For Me* (I may have this subtitle wrong) and other digital alarmists, such as those claiming that Google's making us stupid, and their title is a tipoff: "Digital alarmists are wrong." (Reading the *Times* article online makes me say Google's making me annoyed, rather than stupid, as there are not only five banner ads by Google but also fourteen text ads *interrupting the article*.)

Chabris and Simons, both psychology professors, suggest that the alarmists are less able to concentrate now than they were 10-15 years ago "simply because they are 10 to 15 years older." I think that may be facile (but then, I'm 66, so I *would* think that, wouldn't I?), but I'm inclined to buy this paragraph:

> The appeals to neural plasticity, backed by studies showing that traumatic injuries can reorganize the brain, are largely irrelevant. The basic plan of the brain's "wiring" is determined by genetic programs and biochemical interactions that do most of their work long before a child discovers Facebook and Twitter. There is simply no experimental evidence to show that living with new technologies fundamentally changes brain organization in a way that affects one's ability to focus. Of course, the brain changes any time we form a memory or learn a new skill, but new skills build on our existing capacities without fundamentally changing them. We will no more lose our ability to pay attention than we will lose our ability to listen, see or speak.

Then things get a little trickier, as the writers seem to take on sustained concentration itself:

> [T]he notion that prolonged focus and deep reading mark the best path to wisdom and insight is just an assumption, one that may be an accidental consequence of the printing press predating the computer. To book authors like us it seems a heretical notion, but it is possible that spending 10 or more hours engrossed in a single text might not be the optimal regimen for building brainpower.

I find their example—chess grandmasters who now flicker through hundreds of games rapidly rather than studying chess books for hours—somewhat irrelevant, and I'm not convinced that you can *generally* substitute quick overviews for deep reading, at least not if you really want to *know* a subject. But I've never been convinced that using the internet is somehow changing my brain or making it impossible to read long texts; it's just another choice.

What Horn seizes on, more than the original article, comes near the end:

> The more different ways technology gives us to multitask, the more chances we have to succumb to an illusion of attention—the idea that we are paying attention to and processing more information than we really are. Each time we text while we are driving and do not get into an accident, we become more convinced that we can do two (or three or four …) things at once, when in reality almost no one can multitask successfully and we are all at greater risk when we do so. Our capacity to learn, understand and multitask hasn't changed with the onslaught of technology, but our confidence in our own knowledge and abilities have.

> So Google is not making us stupid, PowerPoint is not destroying literature, and the Internet is not really changing our brains. But they may well be making us think we're smarter than we really are, and that is a dangerous thing.

In this case, while Horn doesn't add a lot to the original article through her commentary (she uses some of the same selections I do), she adds value by shifting the focus slightly through the headline itself. (Not that there's anything wrong with excerpting interesting articles…)

In Other News, Wired is Still Wired

I had two items from *Wired.com* tagged here. One was a fairly long item claiming that a "scientific" survey had found that most iPad owners were "selfish elite," arrogant, wealthy and disinclined to care about others, while most iPad critics were geeks and salt of the earth—or something like that. I found it amusing because *Wired* gives so much press to iAnything—and because the characterization of even the earliest iPad owners was so over-the-top. It was, I suspected, just a ploy to get lots of comments…and, of course, it succeeded. Looking back at it now, it's not worth linking to or commenting on. (The two early iPad owners I know best are about as humanitarian and altruistic as anybody I know. They're also reasonably well off, to be sure.)

The second is a short item that is wholly recursive: As far as I can see, it makes no sense except as an example of its apparent topic. It's by Charlie Sorrel, posted July 29, 2010, and it's entitled "The Cult of Apple: When Even a Battery Charger is Big News." Sorrel claims that the Apple Battery Charger has "been all over the internet."

> It's a nice charger, to be sure: it minimizes "vampire draw" by shutting off the power when the batteries are charged. It ships with six batteries which should last up to ten years and it has the usual Apple polish in the form of coded flashing or steady amber and green LEDs. But does this really warrant the amount of coverage that is being given to a battery charger? After all, there are countless chargers out there that are better featured, or simpler, and certainly cheaper.

> What this insane news coverage really tells us is that, despite the endless whining comments to the contrary, Apple news is big news. People read it, people want it, and people click on it. Sure, Apple benefits from the almost continual din of free publicity, but so do the people publishing the news. And so do you, the reader: From the amount of interest in any Apple news, it's obvious that it is in demand.

Really? There was *that* much coverage for a $30 charger that only holds two batteries—one that Sorrel admitted he'd probably buy? Sorrel certainly added to the media coverage—with a big ol' picture of a tiny little charger. I find his justification for doing so transparent in its use of "benefit"—which means "provides more chances to shove lots of ads in front of your face." I suppose that benefits the reader. I'm not quite sure how.

Do the Wave!

A cluster of items from August 2010 with a common theme: Google Wave and why it never amounted to much. Perhaps worth mentioning a couple of years later as a reminder that Google has never been infallible, even when the company was clearly excited about a new service (and even back when it was still possible to take "do no evil" seriously, although that may be a stretch).

Update on Google Wave
This one's From The Source: *Google Official Blog*, posted August 4, 2010 by Urs Hölzle. Extensive excerpts (the central three paragraphs of a five-paragraph post):

> Last year at Google I/O, when we launched our developer preview of Google Wave, a web app for real time communication and collaboration, it set a high bar for what was possible in a web browser. We showed character-by-character live typing, and the ability to drag-and-drop files from the desktop, even "playback" the history of changes—all within a browser. Developers in the audience stood and cheered. Some even waved their laptops.

> We were equally jazzed about Google Wave internally, even though we weren't quite sure how users would respond to this radically different kind of communication. The use cases we've seen show the power of this technology: sharing images and other media in real time; improving spell-checking by understanding not just an individual word, but also the context of each word; and enabling third-party developers to build new tools like consumer gadgets for travel, or robots to check code.

> But despite these wins, and numerous loyal fans, Wave has not seen the user adoption we would have liked. We don't plan to continue developing Wave as a standalone product, but we will maintain the site at least through the

end of the year and extend the technology for use in other Google projects. The central parts of the code, as well as the protocols that have driven many of Wave's innovations, like drag-and-drop and character-by-character live typing, are already available as open source, so customers and partners can continue the innovation we began. In addition, we will work on tools so that users can easily "liberate" their content from Wave…

That's straightforward. Google thought it was a breakthrough, there was lots of enthusiasm…and it didn't go anywhere. Some of us were so *dis*interested in things like "character-by-character live typing" that we went out of our way to avoid Wave; others just didn't see the point in most real-world applications.

Why didn't Google Wave boot up?

That's Dave Winer's question at *Scripting News* on August 5, 2010—in a post illustrated by a big picture of Julia Child for no apparent reason. Winer identifies himself as a specialist in "the kind of software that Google Wave is"—and cites blogging, RSS and podcasting as examples. As he notes, there have been more failures than successes in the field.

> So there's no shame, as far as I'm concerned, in trying to launch a network of computer users, and having it not boot up.

Why didn't Wave build?

> Here's the problem—when I signed on to Wave, I didn't see anything interesting. It was up to me, the user, to figure out how to sell it. But I didn't understand what it was, or what its capabilities were, and I was busy, always. Even so I would have put the time in if it looked interesting, but it didn't.

But he cites the invitational nature of Wave as a bigger problem.

> I assume they were worried about how the system would perform if they got too many users. It's as if, starting a baseball season, you worry about where you're going to put the World Series trophy. It's not something you need to worry about. You might even say you jinx your prospects for success if you put that in the front of your mind.

He offers five key characteristics of what he saw in Wave: Hard to understand; nothing happening; my friends aren't there; if they wanted to come, I'd have to get them invites; why should I bother? He contrasts that with his early use of Twitter: Easy to understand; stuff already happening; *some* friends were there; anyone could join; no real reason to bother—but it seemed worth writing about. [Emphasis added, some items reworded.]

He's not offering sure-fire formulas: He doesn't have one and I don't believe he thinks there is one. "Even if everything is right, the net might not boot up." As he notes, it took a few tries to get podcasting going (assuming it still is) and there were a lot of community blogging sites before Blogger. "Sometimes it's just the timing."

One of the modest number of comments strikes me as particularly relevant, from "pickme2":

> Invited my friends, we all played, waited for extensions that never arrived and eventually (actually very quickly), attrition rode our little community's wave.

Google fails again

That's Phil Bradley's title for [an August 5, 2010 post](#) at *Phil Bradley's weblog*, and Bradley says this is a late admission of "what everyone has known for a very long time--Google Wave has tanked." He says "Google didn't actually know what it was for" and that it's "just another reminder to everyone—Google is actually an astonishingly inept and incompetent company." That's Bradley's opinion; I might say "Google's willing to throw lots of things out and hope that a few of them stick really well."

He notes the history: Wave started out with 6,000 developers, then opened up to 100,000 people for testing, but didn't become openly available until March 2010, by which time it was almost certainly too late. He notes that Gmail also rolled out slowly—but it's a different kind of product, for person-to-person communication.

> Social networking tools are by their very nature, social. Which means lots of people have to play around with them. They morph and change over time as users start to do different things and they help assist the development of the product. Google doesn't like that, because Google thinks that it knows best. The idea that they might be wrong doesn't really occur to them, and I do actually find it quite shocking that they're pulling Wave quite so early—it's not even been 6 months yet! Rather than say 'look, this isn't working as we thought, what shall we do to change it and improve it?' Google has done what Google always does—closes the door and walks away.

Bradley cites some of Google's other apparent failures: Orkut (still big in Brazil), Lively (who?), Google Answers and a bunch of others (e.g. Knol, which Google shut down much more recently). Oh yes, and Google's irritating attempt to court librarians…

There's more to the post and it's worth reading in the original, even if you don't agree that Google itself (that is, the search engine) is "rubbish" or "a poor product." [Admission: Bing is my primary web search engine with DuckDuckGo as an alternate, switching to Google when I need 100 results per page.]

Bradley's tougher on Google than I would be, but he spends a lot more time looking at search engines than I do and has much more expertise in that field. (I may be handicapped by having lived in Mountain View and worked half a mile from the Googleplex for years: I've been acquainted with some Google people, and "Google has too much money and too few brains" strikes me as harsh, just as the

suggestion that Google hasn't been innovative since 1999 is, I believe, wrong.) He concludes:

> I look at any Google innovation with considerable skepticism now, and I'm not going to put any work into anything that they produce because they may well can it in a few months, and all that work has gone down the drain. That's the other downside of their breathtaking incompetence—I simply don't trust them an inch, and never will, and I'm far from the only one! That's not only bad news for Google, it's bad news for the entire industry.

Whew. I agree that it makes sense to look at Google innovations with "considerable skepticism," but I'd say exactly the same about innovations from Apple, Yahoo! (have there been any?), Microsoft, AOL, Facebook, Twitter….

The comments are interesting and worth reading, some high-fiving Bradley, some disagreeing. His response to one comment that takes him to task for calling Google (search) "rubbish" is interesting and fairly persuasive. In part:

> Google gives different results according to capitalisation or not of Boolean operators. fish AND chips gives different results to fish and chips. Ditto for or/OR

> Search functionality works differently depending on capitalisation of the syntax, so Site: gives different results to site:

> There's no consistency with syntax either, so in one case we do site:.ac.uk, but filetype:.pdf doesn't work.

> Can Google do proper proximity searching? No.

> Can Google do phonetic searching? No.

> Can Google do cluster searching? No.

> Can Google do regional searching? No.

> Can Google even get a basic search which uses a minus sign to give you a smaller set of results each and every time? No.

Why Google Wave Crashed and Burned

Also on August 5, 2010, John Hudson's critique posted at *the Atlantic wire*. This one's a metapost, citing four reasons for Wave's failure from four other writers:

➢ **It was a solution looking for a problem**—quoting *Rob Diana at Regular Geek*, but that's probably the most common thing I heard at the time.

➢ **No one could explain it**—quoting "tech guru" John Gruber.

➢ **They never nurtured a core fan base**—quoting the David Winer discussion excerpted earlier here.

> **Companies couldn't use it**—quoting "Scott at Information Overload" (actually a post at *Informationoverlord,* not *at all* the same thing)

Not much to add here. Hudson calls Google Wave a "much-ballyhooed e-mail and instant messaging application" and I don't think that's what it was at all. Which may be indicative of just how problematic Wave was, pretty much from the start.

Google Wave: why we didn't use it

Given *ars technica*'s bizarre dating practices, I can say this "Ars Staff" piece appeared "about a year ago"—but diigo says I tagged it on August 6, 2010, so let's give it that date.

> The ideas in Wave were undeniably cool, the vision was ambitious, and Google backed it. So why did no one use it?
>
> We looked to our own experiences of using Wave for clues as to what went wrong, and we found plenty.

What follows are commentaries by eight different writers and editors based on their actual attempts to use Wave, which may make this the most useful piece of commentary in this roundup. The first and longest comes from Jon Stokes, who "dove right in" as soon as it was available because he thought it would be great for role-playing games, although he was "immediately hit by how slow and wonky the interface was." The primary interface "sin"? "It crammed a multiple-window-based desktop metaphor into a single browser window." He kept trying, with little success. He did run into the "feature" that turned me off to Wave without even trying it:

> The other problem—and this was a huge issue and a common complaint— was that everyone could watch you type. The live typing was a core part of the Wave protocol, and the developers considered it a critical Wave feature that everyone should just either get over or learn to love. So there was never going to be any way to turn it off and enable a kind of "draft preview" that would let you send complete, IM-style messages. This was a major buzzkill; few people are comfortable in an informal chat where others can watch them type.

Stokes still thinks email "needs to be reinvented, but not quite so radically."

Others contribute variously useful or odd perspectives. Chris Foresman thinks the problem was the lack of alternative interfaces (really?)—clients comparable to Tweetdeck for Twitter. "With only one confusing interface to choose from, Wave just couldn't garner the mass appeal it needed to supplant more firmly entrenched forms of communication." I'm having trouble buying that as *the* primary problem: Do most Facebook users use anything except the awful Facebook interface? (That may be an ignorant question.) Ryan Paul faults the

initial lack of support for existing services: "Wave users can really only use Wave to communicate with other Wave users—it can't serve as a bridge to conventional e-mail and instant messaging."

There's more. Since this group of people does a lot of collaborative work, it's a good case study. Which may make it worth quoting the entirety of the final comment, from Clint Ecker, a project manager/programmer:

> Why Wave failed? The very genesis of this article holds a clue: conceived over IRC, sent out via mass e-mail, and collaboratively composed, edited, and compiled in a locally hosted Etherpad. This speaks volumes about how traditional tools are working a lot better for people than Google ever imagined, despite their problems.

Really? Use existing tools because they work and you're familiar with them? What a notion!

Let's Celebrate Google's Biggest Failures!

Gotta love that exclamation point on this August 5, 2010 essay at *Search Engine Land* by Danny Sullivan. He quotes Eric Schmidt's comment regarding the Wave closure: "We celebrate our failures." Sullivan's take: "When it comes to failures, Google's celebrating more than you might realize." He summarizes "important Google products that haven't made the cut, over time," starting with Google Wave and working backward.

> For each product, I've also pulled a "celebratory failure quote." I don't mean for that to be as snarky as it seems. It's meant to illustrate the difference between how Schmidt's statement sounds and what his company actually tells the world.

> I agree. Google's a company that's not afraid to take risks and does seem to embrace the idea that along the way, there will be failures. Maybe that's "celebrating" those failures. But in its statements to the world, Google rarely sounds like it's celebrating these missteps. It doesn't really document anything that was learned. It just seems to say as little as possible to move on.

Sullivan's take on Google Wave: "perhaps one of the most heavily hyped products that Google's put out, only to have it fall on its face." Otherwise, he's mostly quoting large portions of the same post I quoted earlier.

The essay offers similar Google kissoff quotes on several other failures, some of which I'd entirely forgotten: Google SearchWiki, Google Audio Ads, Google Video (a *long* discussion), Dodgeball, Jaiku, Google Notebook, Google Catalogs (one of the more bizarre ones, as I remember—a "way to search through consumer catalogs"), Google Print Ads, Google Page Creator and Google Answers. He lists a few "next?" cases such as Orkut, Knol, Sidewiki and Buzz, and discusses some

successes. Google has since shut down Google Labs, home for several of its interesting failures.

Rethinking failure: Google Wave

This post, by Nicole Dettmar on August 19, 2010 at *eagledawg,* isn't really a commentary on Wave and why it failed. She notes Slate's *The Wrong Stuff* series, including an interview with Google's Peter Norvig on the virtues of failed experiments. And then she brings it back home:

> From my limited time and perspective in the [library] field thus far I see a lot of the library field as fearing and avoiding failure at almost all costs. Perfectionism can sometimes run so rampant that it squelches any hint of innovation in its path, yet it is innovation that leads to experiments in the first place.

> Are libraries so NASA-caliber that failure can never be an option? No. Mark Funk reminded us in 2008 that "We Have Always Done It That Way" isn't an answer, it's an excuse. At the same time library science journals seem to follow suit with not publishing about failure often as other journals do in not publishing when drug experiments failed.

> I can understand why: it takes a lot of extra time and effort that many librarians do not have to write for publication, and who wants that to highlight a failure? Is there an opportunity for a Wrong Stuff resource of library-related errors and experiments gone wrong so we're not all reinventing the wheel in isolation from one another? The publish button in WordPress makes the process pretty painless!

This may be as good a place as any to end the discussion of Google Wave and THE MIDDLE, with a digression based on Dettmar's closing paragraphs.

I do not believe "library science journals" are unwilling to publish articles about failures. I would guess most professional peer-reviewed journals in the library field would be delighted to publish well-written, professional articles on failures that have further purpose. I *do* believe that such articles are rarely submitted to journals.

As for her suggestion in the last paragraph: Been there. Tried that. Tried it more than once. With no success. None. This is hardly surprising. It is human nature and institutional nature. No librarian interested in keeping their job is going to publish an article about how the library *did it wrong* without getting clearance from the director—and most directors aren't likely to welcome the chance to air their errors. There are exceptions; there have been a few (precious few) cases where missteps and failed experiments have been documented. But it's likely to stay rare, in this and almost any other field. (Some librarians are trying this again. I wish them well in the effort; maybe this time it will be different.)

Sneak preview: I currently have two dozen items tagged toward an essay on libraries and failure, so I will be discussing that topic (but not Wave) in the future. Probably *not* in the next issue, for reasons discussed in another article in this issue, but possibly in the one after that.

Social Networks
The Social Network Scene, Part 2

More vaguely connected cites & insights on social network issues that don't fit neatly into a subcategory. As with Part 1, these are arranged chronologically, this time starting in February 2010 and going through 2010. The connections among these pieces—well, that's part of reading, isn't it? I believe there are some common threads having to do with limits, excess, backing off, privacy and nonsense—but you may find other commonalities.

Chatroulette: Giving Stranger Interactions a Bad Name

I don't think I'd mention Chatroulette at all, but Nina Simon (writing at *Museum 2.0*) is a thoughtful, interesting writer, and I thought it would be worth noting some of what she has to say in this March 8, 2010 post. (I've never used Chatroulette, just as I've never signed up for social networks for would-be adulterers, and for much the same reasons.)

> This morning, in less than fifteen seconds, I saw live video of:
>
> a guy on the phone, lounging in front of his computer
>
> a guy taking a photo of me while ignoring simple questions
>
> a guy who used a mirror effect to look like an alien
>
> a penis
>
> The penis was the last straw. I closed Chatroulette for the third and probably last time.

If you've never heard of Chatroulette, it's "an online service that allows you to videochat with random strangers. It pairs you up automatically with other users to talk, and you can click "Next" at any time to jump to someone else (as I did to penis-guy, and as all three of the other users did to me)."

> Chatroulette frustrates me. It drives me nuts that it's being called "groundbreaking" in the realm of human-to-human interactions. Chatroulette is not groundbreaking, nor is it threatening to the social fabric of society. It's a novelty, and a mostly depressing one at that. Chatroulette

exacerbates the perception that stranger interactions are uncomfortable, weird, and often sexual in nature. It encourages people to see each other as entertainment instead of as human beings. And because users use the "Next" button so liberally--to escape gross users, to find someone interesting--the fundamental activity on Chatroulette is not chatting or connecting with strangers. It's evaluating people. In most cases, within two seconds, you or the person with whom you are videochatting decides that the other person is not worth their time. And that means you reject or are rejected by others, multiple times each minute. What an unpleasant feeling. As New York reporter Sam Anderson put it:

> I got off the ChatRoulette wheel determined never to get back on. I hadn't felt this socially trampled since I was an overweight 12-year-old struggling to get through recess without having my shoes mocked. It was total e-visceration. If this was the future of the Internet, then the future of the Internet obviously didn't include me.

The discussion here is interesting. What appears to frustrate Simon most is that "it doesn't live up to its potential." She discusses what that potential *could* be and possible ways to make social networking with random strangers a more positive thing.

At least one commenter tries to defend Chatroulette, but the defense rings a little hollow. As one comment says in its entirety:

> Everyone I know who has tried Chatroulette has seen a penis or two in the process...

According to Wikipedia (and after some discussion on the talk page, about one out of eight Chatroulette connections results in some form of "R-rated" (or worse) behavior. I read a lot of magazines, I read a lot of books, I spend a lot of time on FriendFeed—but if one out of every eight times I started to read an article, picked up a book, or opened Friendfeed I was dealing with "R-rated" material, I'd get tired of it awfully fast. One defender says:

> Somehow I doubt that Chatroulette gives stranger a bad name as there are normal conversation going on, it's just that time is required to find a decent person who is suited to your liking.

Sorry, but no, especially not for a video-based system. This is saying "after you see enough penises and grossouts, you might find a decent person." *So* not going to happen. (Chatroulette is apparently still around. I still don't plan to try it.)

Privacy Rights

Here's one to think about and possibly score your existing social networks on: Electronic Frontier Foundation's *A Bill of Privacy Rights for Social Network Users*, [posted by Kurt Opsahl on May 19, 2010](#) at *Deep*

Links. I'll quote the three "basic privacy-protective principles that social network users should demand" in full:

#1: The Right to Informed Decision-Making

Users should have the right to a clear user interface that allows them to make informed choices about who sees their data and how it is used.

Users should be able to see readily who is entitled to access any particular piece of information about them, including other people, government officials, websites, applications, advertisers and advertising networks and services.

Whenever possible, a social network service should give users notice when the government or a private party uses legal or administrative processes to seek information about them, so that users have a meaningful opportunity to respond.

#2: The Right to Control

Social network services must ensure that users retain control over the use and disclosure of their data. A social network service should take only a limited license to use data for the purpose for which it was originally given to the provider. When the service wants to make a secondary use of the data, it must obtain explicit opt-in permission from the user. The right to control includes users' right to decide whether their friends may authorize the service to disclose their personal information to third-party websites and applications.

Social network services must ask their users' permission before making any change that could share new data about users, share users' data with new categories of people, or use that data in a new way. Changes like this should be "opt-in" by default, not "opt-out," meaning that users' data is not shared unless a user makes an informed decision to share it. If a social network service is adding some functionality that its users really want, then it should not have to resort to unclear or misleading interfaces to get people to use it.

#3: The Right to Leave

Users giveth, and users should have the right to taketh away.

One of the most basic ways that users can protect their privacy is by leaving a social network service that does not sufficiently protect it. Therefore, a user should have the right to delete data or her entire account from a social network service. And we mean really delete. It is not enough for a service to disable access to data while continuing to store or use it. It should be permanently eliminated from the service's servers.

Furthermore, if users decide to leave a social network service, they should be able to easily, efficiently and freely take their uploaded information away from that service and move it to a different one in a usable format. This concept, known as "data portability" or "data liberation," is fundamental to

promote competition and ensure that users truly maintain control over their information, even if they sever their relationship with a particular service.

I'm not sure I see a lot of need to comment here. How would you evaluate current social network practices against these three priciples, all of which strike me as both sound and minimal. (I'm not in full agreement with EFF all that often, so this is in itself a commentary.)

The Privacy Problem: We Have Met The Enemy And He Is Us

Jump forward almost two years to this Monday, March 5, 2012 post by John Biggs at *techcrunch*. Biggs recounts an incident: getting a text message from a new social network, Highlight, "that will disappear once everyone digests the last of their brisket on the plane ride from SXSW" (since everyone *who is anyone* goes to SXSW!): "The SMS was pretty innocuous…but it included a list of 141 phone numbers." Biggs was getting ready to assail the startup for exposing his phone number so egregiously—but he looked a little further.

> Convinced that Highlight was behind this, I contacted the sender. After some discussion, it turned out that the Highlight app had sent the SMS on behalf of a PR guy a know, a person I trusted with my contact information (if trust is the right word here) and who, in a sense, did a data dump with the help of a standalone iPhone app. He selected 141 phone numbers to SMS and the app did his bidding, albeit on behalf of Highlight. Had he selected 3,000 phone numbers, I'd have a list of 3,000 free numbers right now, but he was the one who pressed the button that sent me the message, not Highlight. Highlight put the gun in the room. He pulled the trigger.

Does this make Highlight innocent? Not really. It just means there's more than one guilty party. If an app makes it so easy to thoughtlessly expose people's information to others, there's a problem. The very next paragraph reveals both an issue and the kind of attitude that helps make the issue worse and worse, specifically the first clause in the first sentence [Emphasis added]:

> I don't want to go all EFF on you here, but it's clear our privacy is being eroded by nefarious corporations that understand that we are all morons. We are more than willing to spam our friends via Facebook, Twitter, mail, and text. We're more than willing to send our entire address book to some server in Sunnyvale. We're totally down with offering up our real names, birth dates, and bank accounts to sites like Mint and we'll probably upload our health records to future sites.

I'm not always in full agreement with EFF, but when it comes to privacy and erosion EFF is a pretty good place to start, not something to deride. There's more about the supposed utility you gain by giving up privacy—and another instance of the extent to which one type of behavior is now the norm, with exceptions to be sneered at [Emphasis added}:

That's why privacy crusaders seem so stridently out of touch: they are smarter than us, or at least they pretend to be. To be completely fair, I don't personally mind that Highlight sends my phone number to potential strangers. After all, it's on countless bathroom stalls already. However, when apps like this scrape contacts and then email or text them on my behalf, bad stuff can happen. People who wanted to remain hidden can be discovered, telemarketers gain a few hundred new targets, and trust is eroded. Worse, stuff like this makes me advertise junk in the name of virality.

There's more here. I'm not sure I recommend it. But there is a point: Too many people willingly trade loads of privacy for a tiny bit of convenience—and are then bothered when that trade becomes apparent. Sooner or later, the devil *does* show up at the crossroads expecting a soul…

linkedin: whybother?

Cute title for kate davis' June 2, 2010 post at *virtually a librarian*. I've had a LinkedIn account for years, making as many links as I plausibly could (and accepting any proposed link with the slightest shred of plausibility, e.g., some from library people I've never heard of)—and when I was out of work, tried to "work the network" for job leads. Right now, I'm thinking I should try to work the network for possible sponsors for library research—and, frankly, "whybother?" is the response that comes to mind.

Davis is no social networking luddite, not by a long shot. (She's Australian; her spelling's just fine.)

In theory, I get that it's useful to have a professional network separate from personal social networks. I get it to the point where I have two Twitter accounts: a private one, where I limit followers to 'real people' (ie no organisations – in fact, I only follow a couple of organisations from this account, which is a hangover from The Time Before Dual Accounts) and I aim to follow everyone back; and a public account, where I do follow organisations, and tweet much more selectively, with a focus on professional topics.

Facebook has a fairly well-defined purpose for me, too: I use it to keep up-to-date with what's happening in my friends' lives, to vent, whinge, moan, and, most importantly, to post photos of my delicious niece and nephew in the forum where the people who want to see them will actually see them. (I have a Flickr account, and I'd much rather post all of my photos to Flickr, but my friends and family aren't in that space.) A few days ago, I did a major round of de-friending in Facebook. It's a yucky process—it kind of feels like poking your tongue out, saying "You're not my friend anymore!", and flouncing away. But I did it, because I made the decision to limit my Facebook network to people I know and actually hang out with

In Real Life. I guess I just wanted to declutter. I'd probably join in the Facebook exodus, if I could just get all my friends and family onto Twitter and posting their photos on Flickr…

She gets it. She's been blogging since July 2007: she gets that too. But when it comes to LinkedIn:

For me, it's just a source of email alerts to "Join my network on LinkedIn". I log in very occasionally to approve these requests, and that's it. Am I missing something? Is there some Great Point to LinkedIn that I'm completely missing?

Nine responses. One thinks it might be more useful for IT professionals. One has been headhunted via LinkedIn and knows of others who've gotten better jobs thanks to LinkedIn. The long positive answer comes from…well, from somebody who was writing a book on using LinkedIn for recruiting.

So maybe LinkedIn is primarily a tool for HR to go find people? Or maybe you need to be extrovert enough to go hounding people for recommendations? How's *your* LinkedIn account benefiting you? (The chief benefit at MPPOW—my penultimate place of work—is that LinkedIn was taking over office space as the shrinking staff vacated it.)

The Seven Digital Sins of Online Collaboration

I'm not quite sure what to make of this one. It's by Nicolas Holzapfel, posted June 26, 2010 at *Johnny Holland*—but what's that? Going to the About page is, if anything, a bit more mysterious, apparently because it's in a language I don't quite understand:

Johnny originates from the need to have a place where creatives can talk and discuss in a normal, honest and pure way. A place where they can focus and learn about the issue that's really important: interaction (in the broadest sense of the word). It's a place where we can get inspired, dare to make mistakes and are able to feel enlightened. This place is an ideal we try to accomplish and need to fight for. It's impossible to gain it immediately and thus the way Johnny has to present itself has to grow and change organically. At first we start with an online magazine where creatives can share their thoughts, but time will tell what's the best format. Maybe Johnny has to be a daily event, maybe a new ice cream flavor.

In order to be successful Johnny has to stay close to his believes: the heart of Johnny. This will be the core from where all decisions will take place. If a move doesn't match it's not a good move… or maybe it's a sign that Johnny has to grow. Time will tell.

Creatives? Enlightened? his believes? The key "believe" is, apparently, that interaction is "the most important part in communication." We learn a bit later that Johnny (the editorial voice of the site?) "He will never brag

about anything or be aggressive, merely honoust." I find it bewildering, but I'm apparently not an honoust creative...

Anyway, to the article.

I'm still in awe of the essence of the Web: connection and collaboration on a previously unimaginable scale. Yet I also feel like these connections waste my time. Not because anything in old media can provide them more effectively, but because the tools that make up the social web are still in a very early stage of evolution and they create a lot of unnecessary waste. This waste is a consequence of the Seven Digital Sins.

His seven digital sins?

➢ **Disorder**: "The absence of ordering by subject matter." Apparently Holzapfel feels that online conversations—threads of comments and the like—should be *internally* organized by subject and distinguish between "unique intelligent insights and throwaway expressions of approval and opposition." *Curated comment sets*—can I have that job when I grow up?

➢ **Clutter**: "The existence of more posts than necessary." Online discussions can be repetitive—and people can misunderstand one another, leading to multiple clarifications.

➢ **Reinventing the Wheel**: "Failure to build on past discussions." People aren't willing to read all the way through long discussions, so the same discussion can happen again. What he thinks *should* happen: "The Internet should be a place where people can access all the knowledge and ideas surrounding a particular subject and then say something which builds on that. In other words, discussions should progress." Well, sure, since accessing *all* the "knowledge and ideas surrounding a particular subject" is such a trivial task.

➢ **Inconsistency**: "Too many competing formats within the same collaborative suite." Here he's talking about tools like Basecamp and Huddle (neither of which I know anything about) and the apparent choice of ways to do something within them. Ah: the next paragraph talks about how having options makes consistency more difficult. I'd almost bet money that Holzapfel uses the Mac OS and despises Windows, given his clear distaste for options.

➢ **Automated miscommunication**: "Too little or too much information about what's happening within the collaboration suite" Again about collaboration suites—but also things like wikis. His broader term is "social media application" and he says:

How do users know when a wiki article relevant to them has been updated? How do they know if someone has replied to a comment they've written? How do they know if there's some new question or idea they should be responding to? Answering these questions satisfactorily becomes

much more difficult when there are half a dozen different formats to keep track of.

➢ **Aimlessness**: "Discussions that run off-track and waste time." He says this is also a sin in the "offline world." He wants discussions that are threaded and controlled in such a way that there are no digressions, no threadjacks, no wasted time.

➢ **Incivility**: "Personal attacks which don't make any constructive point." He's all for anonymity—but believes that discussion formats *themselves* "might serve to undermine the one-on-one personal bickering that existing formats make so easy."

Solutions? Basically it seems to boil down to two things: The last sentence in the article, a glorious handwave, "Our progress towards genuine mass collaboration is limited only by our inability to think outside the offline mental box."—and, oh yes, that Holzapfel is "currently focused on setting up an innovative web service for collaboration and knowledge sharing." One that, one presumes, will solve all these problems.

The second comment on the article is amusing but clearly out of place in a site like *Johnny Holland*:

> Disorder, clutter, redundancy, inconsistency, inaccuracy, pointlessness and rudeness. What's needed here is professional writing, editing and design. You know, like in "old media."

I didn't see any useful comments. After sampling the "newest material, just for you" in the "Magazine" section—and choosing to ignore layout problems like the number of comments frequently being superimposed on the introduction to the article (well, hey, this is a site about *user experience* or, for the in crowd, UX, not, you know, *design* or *grammar* or *readability*), I realized that I really don't speak the same language as these folks. Should be interesting to see how a conversational medium will overcome these "sins" without having full-time online editors and moderated comments, though. I won't hold my breath.

A Bovine Quartet

Technically, it's only 3.5 items—not all in chronological order—but they're near and dear to my heart, given the overall theme: Calling bullshit on social media. The first one alerted me: John Dupuis "Friday Fun: Calling bullshit on social media," posted August 13, 2010 at *Confessions of a Science Librarian.* That post includes links to three prior "informal, semi-serious, so-funny-it-hurts Friday Fun series on the slings and arrows of online social media/networking practices"—two of which I discussed in August 2010 when they were still current. The third one's also a charmer—"5 Things Serious Tech People Need To Stop Tweeting"—but I'll leave you to explore that on your own.

Dupuis calls this one "probably the most serious" of the lot, and I think that's right. Dupuis' post is mostly a link to and quick summary of the post discussed below, so I'll proceed to…

Calling bullshit on social media

Scott Berkun [posted this](#) on June 30, 2009 on his eponymous blog. If Berkun had an appropriate CC license, I'd probably quote the whole thing, but he doesn't, so I won't. I love this second paragraph:

> For starters: social media is a stupid term. Is there any anti-social media out there? Of course not. All media, by definition, is social in some way. The term interactive media, a more accurate term for what's going on, lived out its own rise / hype / boom cycle years ago and was smartly ignored this time around—first rule of PR is never re-use a dead buzzword, even if all that you have left are stupid ones. I've been involved in many stupid terms, from push-technology to parental-controls, so I should know when I see one.

Can I hear an "Amen"? All media are social to some extent, and the term as used groups together things that really don't fit together very well. Then come Berkun's points. The boldface sentences are his points as stated (emphasis in the original). Other text is my own quick summary (although Dupuis' may be better):

➢ **We have always had social networks**. Well, yes, that's what makes society possible. Digital tools change the means and may both improve and degrade such networks, but we've always had them. (I *do* use the term "social networks" but I'm not wild about that one either. I will *not* use the term "social media" because it's flat-out meaningless.)

➢ **There has always been word of mouth, back-channel, "authentic" media tools**. That should be "have" (and given that Berkun is or was making his living through book royalties, he should know better, but hey, it's just a post), but he's certainly right.

➢ **The new media does not necessarily destroy the old**. It's "do" not "does" and I'd put it more strongly: New media *rarely* destroy old ones. But I've been harping on that for considerably more than a decade, and I'm unlikely to convince digital triumphalists any more now than I did then. Neither is Berkun: People who believe the One True Way are going to believe that, regardless of evidence. His summary is as good as most here.

➢ **Social media consultants writing about social media have inherent biases.** Ya' think? He links to a fine (read awful) example. As he notes, "Much writing about social media is **PR people writing about the importance of PR**" [emphasis in the original] and tosses

off some notes about, ahem, "authentic," which is becoming a nonsense word as well.

➢ **Signal to Noise is always the problem.** He points out that lots of people seem to believe that they're "rewarded for publishing frequently above all else."

➢ **All technologies cut both ways and social media will be no different.** That's a tough, courageous and, I suspect, true statement. Except for regarding "social media" as being either a set of technologies or something real. "For all the upsides of any invention there are downsides and it takes time to sort out what they all are. Blogs and Twitter have made self-promotion, and self-aggrandizement, acceptable in ways I've never seen before, and I'm guilty myself. Is it possible to write or publish without self-promotion? I don't know anymore." I'm not sure I do either. **Be suspicious of technologies claimed to change the world.** This call for necessary skepticism is amplified thoughtfully, starting with the first sentence: "The problem with the world is rarely the lack of technologies, the problem is us."

➢ **Always ask "What problem am I trying to solve?"** Also a good discussion.

He points to a "general purpose essay, [How to detect bullshit](#)" and "[How to call BS on a Guru](#)." I won't summarize either one, but you might find them interesting—and, actually, that second one has some very good advice, including one I'd engrave in platinum if I could: "Look for admissions of mistakes and failures. Someone who never admits they are wrong is dangerous." But gurus almost *never* admit they're wrong—otherwise, they wouldn't be gurus.

Back to the original post. I see 132 comments, but most of them are actually pingbacks, not comments. (There's also a partial "response" linked to from the post itself; I didn't find it particularly convincing, but I'm biased.) Remarkably, the most recent comment is from January 2012—2.5 years after the original post. Some of the comments are spam, to be sure. I was taken—not in a good way—by sean allen's comment, which begins:

> Great thoughts and commentary Scott. I'm not sure I clearly see the intent of the article. Today it is Twitter, FB, etc, tomorrow it is something else. As you know, media is just a medium for getting the message out. What ever you call this new method, (social media, new media, web 2.0, etc.), it is just a message. Money follows where people are looking and the anecdotal data supports that people are looking, living, shopping, communicating in these spaces.

Argugghargghguug. "media is just a medium for getting the message out." First of all, an English version of that statement is *clearly and*

demonstrably not true—even if McLuhan wasn't 100% right (which he wasn't), the medium *does* influence the message. Second, to be sure, "media is just a medium" is so wrong that I couldn't go much further. On the other hand, "s0apy" offers a nice little joke:

> Q. What's the difference between a social media consultant and a snake?

> A. You can't get oil out of a social media consultant.

Which may lead fairly directly to this item, the heart of which is in the headline and subhead:

New Social Networking Site Changing The Way Oh, Christ, Forget It Let Someone Else Report On This Bullshit

That's from *The Onion* on May 20, 2010 and maybe that's enough—except that the story appeared early in the life of Foursquare, leading to this opening paragraph:

> While millions of young, tech-savvy professionals already use services like Facebook and Twitter to keep in constant touch with friends, a new social networking platform called Foursquare has recently taken the oh, fucking hell, can't some other desperate news outlet cover this crap instead?

The piece goes on to quote a cofounder—directly at first, followed by "But more than that, Foursquare is an [endless string of meaningless buzzwords we just couldn't bring ourselves to transcribe]." If only the New York *Times*, and maybe *Wired* and *techcrunch* and a few (thousand) others would adopt this model! The rest of the story is equally good, and possibly the best summary of the import of Foursquare I've seen.

Social Media Burnout

I hadn't originally included this post—by Abigail Goben on September 2, 2010 at *hedgehog librarian*—in this cluster, but it's the next up chronologically and while Goben doesn't use the key term, she's saying some of the same things (and, as usual, saying them well). She's focused on the extent to which too many social networks are causing a sort of burnout for some people.

> As I watched the Boing Boing live stream of the Apple announcements yesterday I heaved a reluctant sigh. Apple's adding a social network (Ping), another level of/opportunity for following, and more interacting for those embedded in Itunes. It's 2010, people, and I have Facebook, Friendfeed, Plurk, LinkedIn, Grooveshark, Twitter, Flickr, Last.Fm, Ravelry, JacketFlap, LibraryThing, three blogs, six email accounts, and that doesn't count work email (2), and professional listservs (8?). Do I really want/need another social network?*

She's seeing "an increase of retreat and honing of social media interaction. Several friends have deleted entire accounts, walked away

with hands thrown in the air," and she's been tempted to join them. She's thought about the situation and come to a few conclusions. Briefly:

➢ We don't always need to reinvent the where/how-to-communicate wheel.

➢ Most of us need a way to filter our time spent on networks.

➢ We're running into the clutter of repetition. (Hmm. That one's so important that I'd better post it on my blog, then repost it on Twitter, also on Facebook, also on Friendfeed…and with luck, colleagues will repost it all those places and more…)

➢ We're getting involved to the detriment of the rest of our lives. Not all of us, not all the time….

➢ It's just not coffee. (That one requires expansion: Basically, internet-based social networking really *doesn't* fully replace face-to-face "positive human connection.")

> I think we're going to see an increase of burnout until people are able to decide which one or two networks and methods of communication is the most important for them (and perhaps until companies stop asking us to register and give our opinions on every bleeding thing we ever click on). We'll splinter off into our various little factions that will not be unlike bars with different clientele, coffee shops that have a specific appeal, and every other in person social way we divide ourselves. I also think we're going to see people advocating more and more for an unhooked day of the week/week of the year–where we step back and take a look at people around us, rather than names on a screen.

I think she's right—but, of course, *techcrunch* can't abide backward thinking like this. As she notes, even as she was writing the post, Sarah Lacy was announcing "If You've Got Social Media Fatigue, UR DOIN IT WRONG." Lacy's essay uses "social media" (singular, of course) *way* too often for comfort and uses one personal anecdote as a killer argument. (In that case, the comment stream may be as interesting as the article—but once you run into "personal brand" and all the other effluvia of, I dunno, SMO? [Social Media Optimization], it gets both predictable and tiresome.)

The Path to Dunbar?

The title of this piece, by Steven Levy on November 15, 2010 at *Wired*'s "Epicenter" blog, is actually "The 'Path' to Social Network Serenity Is Lined With 50 Friends." I find it interesting as much for some of the comments as for the primary piece, which is about Path, a "new social service" launching in November 2010 as an iPhone app. (Ooh ooh: Not only a new social "service" but it's only for the cool kids!) The concept starts with Robin Dunbar's anthropological work and his claim that *as a species* we're only able to handle an inner circle of 150 friends or fewer—

which has come to be known as [Dunbar's Number](). (I'll provide the same link Levy did to—oh, you know where it links to. It's actually a pretty decent summary.)

The founder of Path decided there should be a limit on a person's connections to create "a quality network" and, based on another Dunbar theory, concluded that the *real* limit should be 50—that people's personal networks are rings of greater or lesser trust or intimacy, and that 50 is a good compromise so that you're always "sharing a moment with someone who really knows you." Ah, but then it gets more mystical:

> Instead of professional networking or cracker barrel punditry, the purpose of Path would be to capture the daily "moments" that convey joy, particularly when the recipient of those posts knows what they mean to the person expressing them. Morin's canonical example is sharing with his favored fifty the simple fact that he may be imbibing a hot mocha. "My friends know how much I love mochas," he says. "So my friends are happy for me."

> This leads to the third idea behind Path. The only way that Morin's friends and family on Path will learn that he is having a mocha is via a picture snapped on his iPhone and instantly sent to his network of 50 or less.

Maybe later Path will support, you know, *language*—but that's pretty clearly secondary to "expression and communication" through geotagged, time-tagged photos. Here's Monin (the founder): "You can literally see your friend's lives through their eyes."

I am *so* not qualified to comment directly on the merits of Path itself: I don't own an iPhone or plan to buy one, I'm not a visual person by nature (I really can't see myself snapping instant "moments that convey joy" such as, what getting my Monday order of General's Chicken?), I don't think I have an inner circle of five friends and my reasonably trusted circle is inchoate but probably more than 50. But that's me.

The very first comment is pretty much what I'd expect, from someone who is *certain* what *the* purpose of social networking is (and there can only be one purpose, right?):

> Path sounds like a stupid idea. The limit of just 50 friends frankly makes no sense. This might make it a more secure and private network but the purpose of social networking is not achieved in this. I am more keen for MyCube or Diaspora to release as they sound more promising as they seem to be secure and have no limit on friends.

The second takes on the moments of joy: "seriously … who really cares about the minutia of anyone's lives … even those closest to you? seems like maybe you don't have enough really important stuff in you life to worry about if these miscellaneous details of other's lives are getting top billing." I'm sympathetic to that notion, but then I also find Foursquare silly. After some others, there's another who's really *angry* about the Dunbar Number:

> I don't really care what their fake psuedo-sciences say- I have 1,600 freinds on Facebook and interact with a signifigant portion of them. Many are work contacts, many are old freinds. Many are jsut random interesting people I have freinded. A 50 freind limit is a deal-breaker, not only that, but it certainly means I will NEVER try Path.

I swear that I cut-and-pasted "bsu2006"'s comment above without alteration. Nobody seemed enchanted by the idea, although Steven Levy seems moderately enthusiastic (which, for a cheerleader like Levy, may constitute damning with faint praise).

Were is Path today? Let's consult the fount of all wisdom. It says that there's now an Android version, that the limit is now 150, that a user can add any other user to their own list without permission—and that the added user can't block this. The system was apparently "relaunched" in November 2011 and had grown from 30,000 to more than 300,000 in a month. It all seems a bit mysterious to me.

"Unfriending, Unfollowing, Unsubscribing…

Less is More." That's the full title of this November 29, 2010 post by Louis Gray at his eponymous blog. It may be useful to note that Gray now works as a product marketing manager on Google+, but this piece was written before he joined Google. Or, to quote from his disclosure statement:

> As you can anticipate, while Google and I agree on many things, my opinions don't generally reflect the opinions of my employer, and should be considered my own. (This is especially true for posts dating prior to August 2011) [Emphasis added.]

Here's the intro to the post:

> The world of social media and networking is much too consumed with numbers, and it seems at times, we are making sacrifices of our time and energy wading through piles of noise and indirect relationships in an effort to obtain the rare connections of serendipity that bring us value.

That link is to an interesting post, although it's one that I'll argue is false in at least one respect:

> Ask any active social media user or blogger their follower statistics or RSS subscribers, or even their usual page views per day or month, and they will know within 3-5%. Anybody who says they don't know or don't check is probably lying. They might modestly tell you that one number is "too high" because of one service or another, or they aren't chasing numbers, but they know because it's one way to measure success.

That may be true for people who think "active social media user" is a meaningful phrase, but it's *certainly* not true for all active bloggers, unless you define "active" narrowly. I'm nearly certain lots of library bloggers never check their stats—and they may not even have access to

them. The sentence "Anybody who says they don't know or don't check is probably lying" is unfortunate and implies that *all* bloggers are primarily interested in how many readers they have. Don't generalize, Louis…especially not in a post where you're decrying numbers. (That post is interesting in other ways. For example, he describes Google Buzz as "the first real valuable network to come along in a while," which isn't how things played out.) His closing paragraph could be interesting but I think fails right in the first sentence:

> We have got to achieve more accurate ratings of influence that determine value. There is no question that value of an individual varies widely from one person's point of view to another, but I've just about had it with follower numbers. How would social networks be improved if we just hid them away entirely, and stopped looking at growth or relative sizes? My value is still the same, in terms of quality, whether I have an audience of 2,000 or 20,000, especially if I have the right people. Buzz had a chance to take a high road with putting the numbers game aside, but we're seeing the games begin already. I wonder what new network will be the first to start focusing on quality and less on quantity.

Why must "we" have "more accurate ratings of influence"? Is it really reasonable to suggest that the value of an individual has much to do with how active she is on social networks or how many followers he has? Wasn't there the idea that social networks were, you know, *social*, not about ranking and measuring influence? (What a silly notion…)

Anyway, back to the November post. Gray's refining his own approach to networks:

> I've had it with seeing the streams where I spend a lot of time overwhelmed by strangers and off-topic behavior, and continue to take steps to improve the experience. Lately, I've resorted to seeing my numbers go in the reverse direction—fewer connections, fewer subscriptions and fewer services.

That's healthy, I think, and apparently it really *is* a change, as Gray previously said that "to jump on the massive unfollowing trend would be a mistake." (I wasn't aware of a "massive unfollowing trend," but I'm not a social media guru or even a social networking expert.) That post seems heavy on demonstration that Gray is a true insider who knows more than us peons and is *so popular* that he can't afford to actually choose those who he'd follow. This later post comes *very* close to being an "I was wrong" admission—but he avoids such an admission.

What's changed? Well, one thing is that Facebook's acquisition of Friendfeed, according to Gray, "[puts] he once-vibrant community into practical mummification, making its centricity for my own activity dramatically less useful." If your game is having ginormous networks, that's true—but for those of us more interested in quality than in

quantity, Friendfeed serves as well now as it did in August 2009, when it apparently died for Gray.

Beyond that, there are more services, and eventually he became aware of the craziness of it all. So he got rid of 1,200 Friends at Facebook, "going from 2200+ to less than 1,000" in one day. He also started unfollowing people on Twitter (the post makes sure we know *Gray is an insider*) and cut the number of people he followed from an absurd 14,000 to "about 2,000"—which, to my poor aged mind, is still an order of magnitude too high.

And, gasp, he decided "to unsubscribe from services that I don't use." He deleted some accounts. He reduced the number of RSS feeds he follows. Oh, let's be clear: Even as of November 2010, he regarded Google Buzz as vitally important—he actually calls it, LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter "practically the only games in town for centralized discussions now." And he closes:

> There's no harm in letting people go. It's your right to unfollow and unsubscribe. It's their right to bring you value and deliver you a good experience so you don't disconnect. But if you're finding your streams a mess, take a deep breath and do something about it. I am glad I did.

It's a useful post—and I'd like it a *lot* more of Gray didn't ooze such an air of self-importance. But that's just me. And that reminds me that I really should do a similar slicing, not because I have anywhere near the numbers, but because I'm tired of only being able to follow select subgroups of my Facebook "friends," most of which I've never met and don't know at all. The benefit of slashing, for me, would be the ability to actually *follow* discussions.

No Conclusion

That's it for Part 2, taking us through 2010. I *think* I can do all the items I tagged during 2011 (that aren't network-specific) in a single chunk, Part 3, if only by being more ruthless about ignoring posts. We shall see…

Meanwhile: When's the last time you did a social network audit? Do you follow too many folks? How many of your friends do you know anything about at all? Are there networks where you can't see what benefit you've ever received or given? A little downsizing rarely hurts…even if you're not an insider with thousands upon thousands of people desperately following every word you offer.

Media
Mystery Collection, Part 5

Discs 25-30 of this 60-disc, 250-movie collection.

Disc 25

Big Town After Dark, 1947, b&w. William C. Thomas (dir.), Philip Reed, Hillary Brooke, Richard Travis, Anne Gillis, Vince Barnett. 1:09.

Crime reporter sells her first novel, gets teased about it by the managing editor (who's also fond of her), resigns with two weeks' notice. Owner of paper has niece who wants job (but he'd just as soon see her not get one); managing editor decides to hire niece as new crime reporter as tactic to convince the other one to stick around. Yes, there's a nod to similar plots: someone in the newsroom at police headquarters mentions "Remember what happened to Hildy?"

Seems the niece isn't exactly the innocent journalism student she claims to be. There's a fairly complex and quite lively plot involving semi-legal private gambling clubs, "kidnapping" and more. It all works quite well, and was a pleasure to watch. $1.50.

Born to Fight, 1936, b&w. Charles Hutchinson (dir.), Frankie Darro, Kane Richmond, Jack La Rue, Frances Grant, Fred "Snowflake" Toones. 1:05 [1:08]

The mystery here is mostly why this is in this collection. It's primarily a boxing film—with lots of stuff about honor and, strangely, two big musical numbers. The hero is a handsome young lightweight boxer in New York who devastates his opponents with a 1-2-3 punch combination and then makes sure the opponents are OK. His manager won't take him on the road, but he's still Destined for Greatness.

Until the local hotshot crooked gambler encounters him at a swanky restaurant, yells at him for not taking a dive in the latest fight and costing the gambler a chunk, and punches him—to which he responds, of course. At which point, with the gambler injured, his manager tells him he has to get out of town—thumb his way to Chicago.

During which process, as he winds up in a hobo camp; we get a bunch of hobos staging a multipart-harmony original song, conductor and all; we get an even younger small hobo who's being picked on by other hobos and who fights back; we get a free-for-all with the boxer involved; and, before we know it, the kid and the boxer are on the lam, make their way to Chicago, and the boxer becomes the kid's manager, using an assumed name…and trying to teach the kid to lead with his left, not his right.

I won't bother with the rest of the plot. There's another bizarre musical number. It's interesting that we get a happy ending only because somebody gets shot dead at a convenient plot point. After seeing some other flicks, I'm guessing there were at one point a lot of Frankie Darro fans (he's the kid, of course), who no doubt loved this movie. Lots of boxing, not a whole lot of acting, a somewhat sketchy print and, at best, worth $0.75.

Borderline, 1950, b&w. William A. Seiter (dir.), Fred MacMurray, Claire Trevor, Raymond Burr, José Torvay, Morris Ankrum. 1:28. Previously reviewed (*C&I* 8:5, May 2008):

> Maybe I saw too much of Raymond Burr on TV, but his bad-guy movie roles always strike me as suiting him better than Perry Mason. This one's no exception. Burr is a drug ringleader (or one rung below leader) in Mexico. MacMurray and Trevor are two different American agents sent—by two different agencies—to infiltrate the gang. Naturally, each of them thinks the other one's part of the gang. Naturally, they fall in love. Naturally, it all works out. It's an odd combination—part comedy, part noir, part "melodrama" as the sleeve says—but, to my mind, it works pretty well. For that matter, MacMurray makes a fine leading man and tough guy. I found it enjoyable and the print's pretty good. $1.50.

The Girl in Lover's Lane, 1959, b&w. Charles R. Rondeau (dir.), Brett Halsey, Joyce Meadows, Lowell Brown, Jack Elam, Selette Cole. 1:18 [1:16].

> We begin with a young man in a suit being chased in a train yard by two punks—and at one point he tosses his wallet into an open freight car, just before the punks catch him, knock him out and complain that there's no wallet. The drifter who'd been in the freight car pulls him in and, after he wakes up, discusses the realities of being a hobo. (The drifter is notably also fairly well dressed and clean-shaven.) The kid has $100, a fortune apparently; he's running away from his wealthy parents (because they're thinking of divorce) and is willing to provide the dough if the two can travel together for a while.
>
> They get to a small town, Sherman. Almost immediately the kid gets in trouble in a pool hall by flashing his money—and the four punks at the pool hall clearly want to beat up the two guys and take the $100. Somehow, that's not how the fight works out. There's also a café with a lonely beautiful young waitress (daughter of the owner/cook)…
>
> Long story short, the older guy gets involved with the girl (but still aims to leave town) while filling in part-time at the café; a local creep (Jack Elam) who "seems harmless" but pretty clearly isn't resents the older guy; as the two are ready to leave town, they split up, the younger one *does* leave, and the local creep kills the waitress—who's discovered, just before she actually dies, by the older drifter who's decided he *does* love her and wants to stick around. Naturally, he winds up at the sheriff's office and it's clear a lynch mob will form. Which it does.
>
> A real paean to small-town life: There's a house of prostitution involved, half of the kids are criminal punks, the townsfolk *immediately* set out to lynch someone who *might* have done something, and the obviously-bizarre local isn't suspected until he confesses. The print's not very good, with some dialog missing and some fuzziness. Still, the flick's not without some merit. I'll give it $1.00.

Disc 26

Another case in which the order of movies on the sleeve is not the order of movies on the disc. Reviews are in the order of movies on the disc.

The Most Dangerous Game, 1932, b&w, Irving Pichel and Ernest B. Schoedsack (dirs.), Joel McCrea, Fay Wray, Leslie Banks, Robert Armstrong. 1:03.

> Reviewed as part of *50 Movie Pack Hollywood Legends*; not re-reviewed. What I had to say in 2007:

> > Rich hunter on a boat trip. The buoys don't look quite right to the captain, but the hunter insists they continue—leading to a shipwreck which he alone survives. He winds up at a castle on a remote island, hosted by Count Zaroff, who recognizes him as a great hunter and boasts of hunting "the most dangerous game." Other than a bunch of Russian-only servants, the only other ones there are a couple (also survivors of a shipwreck), with the man a somewhat drunken mess. Eventually, it becomes clear just what the most dangerous game is. Scratchy soundtrack but an effective, fast-moving flick. $1.50.

The Phantom Broadcast, 1933, b&w. Phil Rosen (dir.), Ralph Forbes, Vivienne Osborne, Arnold Gray, Gail Patrick, Guinn Williams, George 'Gabby' Hayes. 1:12.

> A slow movie where the mystery is revealed halfway through and isn't about who committed the murder. The setup: A radio crooner, who receives hundreds of love letters each day, is also a Lothario—we see a valet deliver several little boxes to various women, each containing a bouquet and a message saying the crooner hopes to have dinner with the woman (on a different night in each case) and is singing for her. Another twist: One of his flames, who believes she's going to move in with him and marry him, is part of a group of mobsters that wants to get rid of his manager/accompanist and take him over to rake in the big bucks.

> Oh, one oddity: When the crooner sings, he's always in a studio…with a curtain set up so you only see the hands of the accompanist. It doesn't take long to learn the reason for that: The accompanist, a hunchback (a word repeated frequently, sometimes with "little" added), is the one actually doing the singing—the crooner's just there for appearances.

> Let's see. We get a young woman with a great voice who has to choose between her vocal career and marrying her doctor fiancée (who's going off on a six-month cruise as a ship's doctor to earn enough to set up his practice), since an artist can only serve one master. We get a rubout that doesn't happen. We get someone taking the rap for someone else who, as it happens, wasn't involved at all. And, of course, we get an ending that could be worse.

Damned if I know what to think of this one. Lethargic, and deep emotions seemed to be expressed by the same long slow looks as, well, boredom or anything else. Maybe $1.00.

Murder on the Campus, 1933, b&w. Richard Thorpe (dir.), Charles Starrett, Shirley Grey, J. Farrell MacDonald, Ruth Hall, Dewey Robinson, Maurice Black, Edward Van Sloan. 1:13 [1:09]

Lots of plot, but none of it hangs together very well. We have a gambler, a wisecracking reporter who's in love with a singer at the gambler's (I guess?) nightclub and who's also working her way through college, a murder in the campus campanile and, shortly thereafter, two other murders… And the reporter always seems to be On The Scene.

All too complicated, and far too much of it hinges on the reporter being both incredibly clever and a complete numbskull, as he *privately* confronts the person he believes responsible for all the deaths—apparently a Professor of Everything, as he has high-power recording and playback equipment, lots of other electronics, and oodles of chemistry equipment in his lab, along with a full darkroom—with his suspicions and evidence. There's so much else that's wildly implausible in this mess that the climax is no worse than anything else. At best, I give this $0.75.

Death from a Distance, 1935, b&w. Frank R. Strayer (dir.), Russell Hopton, Lola Lane, George F. Marion, Lee Kohlmar, John St. Polis. 1:08 [1:10]

This one also has a wisecracking reporter (a 23 year old woman), along with a sometimes-wisecracking homicide detective, with the two fighting so much you *know* they're going to wind up together. That's not the primary plot, though.

The plot: We're in a planetarium at an observatory, with a famed European professor giving an illustrated lecture, by invitation only. Suddenly, a shot rings out…and, as people start panicking, the head of the observatory tells the—well, I'm not sure just what he is, so let's say "general functionary"—to lock the door. Thus, whoever shot the man (one of the audience, not the lecturer) must still be in the room. Police are called. Oh, by the way, the reporter was part of the audience. One audience member wasn't on the original invitation list (but must had an invitation to get in): a Hindu who knew the victim but asserts his innocence…and is arrested, even though the detective's pretty sure he's not the culprit.

That starts things off. As the movie goes along, we get an ex-con who's changed his name and become an astronomer, lots of plot involving Arcturus ("Job's star") and double-dealing, an apparent second murder (or maybe suicide), the use of Arcturus itself as a murder weapon (you'll just have to watch the picture), and a culprit who may be obvious to some viewers. Or not.

Unlike the previous movie, and apart from one or two odd plot twists, this one seems to work and was a pleasure to watch. Unfortunately, the sound

track's not great, there are synchronization problems, and for the first few minutes there are flashes of color noise. Those technical problems reduce this to $1.25.

Disc 27

The King Murder, 1932, b&w. Richard Thorpe (dir.), Conway Tearle, Natalie Moorhead, Marceline Day, Dorothy Revier, Don Alvarado, Huntley Gordon. 1:07.

Right off the bat, you get a feeling that you've been dropped into the middle of a longer movie—a classy woman's standing next to a counter, a cop walks by, seems to sneer at her, and walks out of what's labeled a Homicide Bureau. Things don't get better.

I can't even begin to summarize the players and the plot, partly because I found little to differentiate them. I'm not even sure I know how many characters there were. I know there's a society type, his (wife? fiancée?), his (girlfriend? mistress? blackmailer?), a second-story man, a thug involved with the mistress/blackmailing her, and apparently lots more, most of them with motives… It may be indicative that the seemingly most important character is *eighth* in the IMDB list.

This one's a mess: Lots of odd plots that seem tossed in at random and don't cohere very well, with a murder weapon that seems absurd and a denouement that's equally silly. Either this was poorly written and filmed on no budget and with no directorial skill, or it's a badly edited selection from a longer movie or a serial. In any case, I can't give it more than $0.75.

The Lady in Scarlet, 1935, b&w. Charles Lamont (dir.), Reginald Denny, Patricia Farr, Jameson Thomas, Dorothy Revier, James Bush, Lew Kelly. 1:05.

A wisecracking detective and his sidekick / secretary / girlfriend / wife?, who he refers to as "Ignorant" or "Stupid" as seemingly cute names, and who seems to have his office in a bar, finds himself investigating the murder of an art dealer because he's friends with the dealer's wife (who used to be in musicals and who the dealer correctly thought was cheating on him with a doctor). That's part of a complicated plot involving another murder (the doctor), suspects galore, a stolid and seemingly stupid police detective who consistently lets the private eye run the show—and a final Everyone In The Same Room bit.

But it's cute, the plot's not bad, and it moves right along. Not great, but maybe worth $1.25.

Sinister Hands, 1932, b&w. Armand Schaefer (dir.), Jack Mulhall, Phyllis Barrington, Cranford Kent, Mischa Auer, Louis Natheaux, Gertrude Messinger, and James P Burtis as Detective "Don't Call Me Watson" Watkins. 1:05.

We begin with a lady consulting a swami and his crystal ball. We continue with an odd set of scenes involving people around a swimming pool, apparent hanky-panky between residents of two adjacent mansions, a known gangster who's trying to marry the daughter of a rich man and more. Oh, and the rich man's dictating letters to his secretary (on a Dictaphone, wax cylinder and all) and, in the process, recording what could be the argument that proves who killed him…or not. That evening, all and sundry are gathered at the man's estate with his wife (the lady consulting the swami) and the swami. Turn off the lights for a proper reading and, shazam…the man's been stabbed to death.

After that (it's much slower than the summary might suggest—this is a slow-paced movie), we get the police detective conducting pretty cursory interviews with each of the apparent suspects, with a judge (who's among the guests) in on the interviews. The judge writes down a list of all the suspects, at the end of which the detective makes a joke about whether the judge should add his own name. At this point, we know how it's going to turn out, don't we?

In the interim, we have a "heavily-guarded house" (where all the suspects are sleeping over) where it's easy to sneak around, remove the knife from one body, stab someone else, go in and out of bedrooms past sleeping police…and a running joke about a stolid policeman's last name. Followed by the time-honored traditional closing: The Big Scene with Everybody in One Room, where the detective points out each suspect and then says why he or she didn't do it. (The extreme case: The suspect was not only the only one who was loyal to the first victim, he was the second victim.) Although it's a little on the slow side, it's good enough; I'll give it $1.25.

The Lady Confesses, 1945, b&w. Sam Newfield (dir.), Mary Beth Hughes, Hugh Beaumont, Edmund MacDonald, Claudia Drake, Emmet Vogan, Barbara Slater. 1:04.

A young woman answers a knock on her apartment door, to be confronted by her fiancé's wife—who disappeared seven years earlier and was presumed dead. The wife says she'll make sure he never marries the young woman or anyone else and storms off.

Meanwhile, the man—Larry—shows up at a nightclub several sheets to the wind, downs two more double Scotches rapidly and winds up sleeping it off in the singer's dressing room, after first making sure he confronts the club's owner. A few hours later, the singer wakes him up to answer a phone call from the young woman; he picks her up and drives her to his wife's place (he says she showed up a couple of weeks earlier but intends to divorce him)…and when they get there, a bunch of police are present along with the wife, strangled with a cord.

He has a *perfect* alibi, clearly. Her alibi isn't as good. The club owner also knew the wife (she'd loaned him serious money to start the club). As things progress, with the young woman doing her own detective work, we

wind up with another murder along the same lines—the singer this time—and almost a third.

It's pretty well done, but I think there's one serious flaw: We learn the murder's identity about halfway in, and it would have been a much better movie if we were in the dark. (Oh, and the Beaver's dad had a darker side in his earlier movie career…) Given that (and, frankly, that portions of the motivation just don't make sense), I can't give it more than $1.25.

Disc 28

Shoot to Kill, 1947, b&w. William Berke (dir.), Russell Wade, Luana Walters, Edmund MacDonald, Robert Kent, Vince Barnett, Nestor Paiva, Charles Trowbridge. 1:04.

The first in a quartet of barely-feature-length films, all just over an hour. This one is told in flashback by a woman in a hospital bed, there after surviving a car crash following a police chase and shootout—a chase in which her husband (the incoming district attorney) and a gangster (escaped from prison, where he was sent for a murder in a case tried by the husband) both die. She tells the story to a newspaper reporter who's obviously much more than that.

It's quite a story: Civic corruption on a grand scale, crooks battling crooks, a phony marriage (to avoid bigamy)…and ever so much more. It's mostly fast moving and it holds together quite well. While it's not a great film, it's well made, well-acted and more plausible than quite a few of this ilk. Oh yes: There are two musical numbers written and performed by pianist Gene Rodgers, who is damn good. I'll give it $1.50.

Shadows on the Stairs, 1941, b&w. D. Ross Lederman (dir.), Frieda Inescort, Paul Cavanagh, Heather Angel, Bruce lester, Miles Mander, Lumsden Hare, Turhan Bey, Mary Field. 1:04.

An odd one indeed, mostly set in a London boarding house (explicitly identified as 1937, I guess to make it explicitly pre-war) but starting with a mysterious scene on the docks. So many people seem involved in various shenanigans, mostly with no apparent purpose, that it's hard to either follow the plot or perceive that there is a plot. There are various subplots (possible adultery being one), but nothing that really hangs together.

Indeed, that's true for about half of the film: All very odd, little of it leading much of anywhere. Then the murders and suicides, and cursory police work from an idiot police sergeant, begin and, well, it doesn't hang together very well even then. The surprise ending makes it all sensible, or maybe not.

Here's the thing: Silly and confusing as it all is, it's also well played. It's a trifle with an odd, meandering plot, but the print is excellent and I'll give it $1.25.

Prison Train, 1938, b&w. Gordon Wiles (dir.), Fred Keating, Dorothy Comingore, Clarence Muse, Faith Bacon, Alexander Leftwich. 1:04.

The hero (?) of this brief, not especially mysterious, flick is a racketeer, who runs the policy (numbers) racket, owns a nightclub and is a charmer. A rival nightclub-owner/racketeer wants to bring him down and agrees to cooperate with the crusading DA (you know, the kind of crusader who goes out looking for racketeers as compatriots).

The "taking down the numbers man" plot never amounts to much. Instead, we have the racketeer's lovely and innocent sister, the handsome lawyer son of the rival crook, and a sequence that results in the racketeer "accidentally" killing the son. (Hey, he only meant to teach him a lesson…) And getting sent up for it. And the father—the rival racketeer—trying to shoot the first racketeer for killing his son, but botching it. But the rival gets out on bond, even though he was caught in the act and is pretty clearly intent on offing his rival. Side plot: The first racketeer was trying to turn the numbers racket over to the rival and go off to Europe with the sister.

Anyhoo…this brings us to the film's title and the fact that filming on a moving train always adds class and interest. It does not, unfortunately, add plausibility, and the rest of the flick (another con on his way to Alcatraz keeps telling the racketeer that he'll never make it to the last stop; he doesn't; there are lots of complications along the way) just seemed to amount to very little. It seemed a lot longer than it actually was. I'm being charitable with $1.00.

They Never Come Back, 1932, b&w. Fred C. Newmeyer (dir.), Regis Toomey, Dorothy Sebastian, Edward Woods, Greta Granstedt, Earle Foxe. 1:04 [1:02]

The title refers to the idea that boxers never successfully return to the ring once they're sidelined with an injury—in this case, the hero's left arm. That's after ten minutes of somewhat aimless boxing footage. Along with another five minutes or more later in the movie, that's a quarter of the flick for which no dialogue or acting was required—which, in the case of this film, may be a good thing. In the middle, I think another five or six minutes are taken up with some really bad dance routines (don't high-steppers usually make *some* attempt to synchronize with the music?)—so, in essence, there's about half an hour of acting.

The plot? The washed-up boxer, whose mother died as he was preparing for the fight, is living with his sister (who he brought out from the mother's house, I guess) and looking for a job. He finds one as the "assistant manager"—that is, bouncer, as he says—for a nightclub. He gets interested in a showgirl, who's also a focus of the club's owner, and meets the cashier—the showgirl's sister. Before too long, we get a scene where the cashier asks the bouncer to hold the fort while the cashier runs an errand; at the end of the evening, the house is $500 short and, lo and behold, there's the money in the bouncer's jacket. It's a frame, of course, but he winds up spending six months in the joint (apparently without benefit of trial). During those months, the showgirl comes to see him every week.

Partway through, the cashier admits to his sister (the showgirl) that *he* framed the boxer, because he had to: He'd "borrowed" $1,000 from the club and knew he'd be sent to jail if he didn't do the frame. The sister figures she'd better play ball…

Anyway, the boxer gets out, sees the sister with the owner, finds out that *his* sister and the cashier are an item (I think that happens earlier), and—rather than knocking the cashier's block off for framing him—goes to sign up for a fight to get the $1,000 to clear the cashier. It all winds up with a big fight at the club and, apparently, all living happily ever after.

That's way more description than this sad little flick deserves. No mystery, no drama, nothing of any particular interest, and not much in the way of acting. Unless you're heavy into poorly filmed boxing or are a big Regis Toomey fan, there's nothing here. Generously, $0.75.

Disc 29

The Hoodlum, 1951, b&w. Max Nosseck (dir.), Lawrence Tierney, Allene Roberts, Marjorie Riordan, Lisa Golm. 1:02.

The term "film noir" and the vaguer "noir" have been applied by various amateur reviewers to many of the flicks in this massive set, and I suspect this one's no different. (As I discovered checking IMDB: Yep—"a very underrated B film noir." You can get away with almost any crap as long as it appears to be noir.) Unfortunately, "noir" has become a lazy way to glamorize cheap, *nasty* flicks—ones that revel in the dark side of humanity without the skill to suggest deeper meanings. I suspect much of what's celebrated as noir is actually a browner color that gives off a certain stench. From now on, I'm calling movies like this by an appropriate name: Crappy movies.This one doesn't even have the excuse of being filmed during the Depression.

This sad little B movie gives it away in the title. It's about a hoodlum—a piece of work who's arrested pretty much every year from age 15 onward for increasingly serious acts of casual thuggery. This time, he's in for 5 to 25— and although the warden sees a lifetime criminal for what he is, the aging mother somehow convinces the parole board to free him.

Which, of course, does not go well. Need I recount the plot? He betrays his brother, seduces his brother's girlfriend (who later commits suicide), sets up a really dumb armored car robbery that yields two dead in his little gang and two dead armored car employees…and eventually even his mother tells him what a piece of work he is, then dies. As does he, shortly thereafter. He never grows as a character; he's scum, and seemingly proud of it.

I see no redeeming qualities in this other than its brief length. If you're a believer that all noir has its worth (as, apparently, most of those who deigned to review this on IMDB do) and that badly done cheap flicks with no redeeming virtues are all noir, I suppose this could get $0.50.

Dick Tracy's Dilemma, 1947, b&w. John Rawlins (dir.), Ralph Byrd, Lyle Latell, Kay Christopher, Jack Lambert, Ian Keith, Bernadene Hayes, Jimmy Conlin. 1:00.

It's a Dick Tracy B programmer, and that means slightly over-acted with silly character names, oddly named villains and good clean fun. This time, the villain is The Claw, a criminal whose right hand was replaced with a hook in the same accident that messed up one of his legs. We also have Honesty Insurance (with Peter Premium as a VP), Vitamin Flintheart, Tess Trueheart, Sightless the 'Blind' Beggar (whose sign is honest: "I am Sightless"), Longshot Lillie and more.

The setup: A furrier's fortune in furs is stolen from his vault—by somebody who clearly knew the combination, changed just a couple days ago when the furrier changed insurance companies. In the process, the night watchman was slain. Who did it and why? We find out in a spirited hour. Great fun, but also a one-hour flick (and exactly the right length); I give it $1.00.

Black Gold, 1936, b&w. Russell Hopton (dir.), Frankie Darro, LeRoy Mason, Gloria Shea, Berton Churchill, Stanley Fields, Frank Shannon, George Cleveland, Fred 'Snowflake' Toones, Dewey Robinson. 0:57 [0:54].

What we have here is a musical, with original songs. Or it's a romantic dramedy, with a young couple meeting cute and immediately falling for each other. Or it's a tale of industrial sabotage and ruthless oilmen. Or it's a tale of rebellious youth. It's really all of those, with easily enough plot for a three-hour extravaganza…and the whole thing runs 54 minutes. Of which the first 2+ minutes are essentially waste footage showing various oil-rig scenes and showing off the cinematographer's love of fancy dissolves, and another couple of minutes are apparently stock footage with the star overlaid, also showing off both fancy dissolves and fancy picture overlays.

What it isn't is a mystery. The villain's obvious from the first time we meet him, the ending *has* to be a happy one (although there's a twist to it that makes no sense at all to me, but to explain it would be a spoiler), and very little is mysterious along the way. I think the movie relies primarily on fans of Frankie Darro, and it's one of those movies that begins by showing each major character with the actor's name. It's certainly fast moving, and enjoyable enough in its odd way. I'll give it $1.00.

Blonde Ice, 1948, b&w. Jack Bernhard (dir.), Robert Paige, Leslie Brooks, Russ Vincent, Michael Whalen, James Griffith, Emory Parnell, Walter Sands, John Holland, Mildred Coles. 1:13.

This one starts out fast and never stops moving. We're at a wedding, where various men are bemoaning the fact that their onetime girlfriend is marrying a wealthy man—and some of them have engraved cigarette cases from her. One throws the case away from a verandah (the wedding's at the wealthy groom's

home), shortly before the new bride comes out and assures him that she loves him (not the groom) and will write to him from the honeymoon…

Now the couple is on the honeymoon. She's writing a love letter to the spurned man; when her husband enters the room, she covers it with a brief letter to somebody else. Unfortunately, when he's reading the innocent letter, he drops it, reveals the other letter, and walks out on her, flying back from the LA hotel to his home in San Francisco.

Without revealing too much of the plot, let's just say that the next day the new widow goes after her old flame again…and then gets engaged to an up-and-coming Congressman, shedding more blood along the way. Oh, and pretty convincingly framing the old flame she still professes to love.

It all works out in the end, and it's quite an amalgam of newspaper life (the old flame's a newspaper columnist, she was a society writer and has become the society editor) and sheer coldblooded ambition mixed with sociopathy. The only problem I had is that this woman strikes me as so absurdly cold that, stunning as she may be, I couldn't see how she got so many men falling for her so rapidly. But I'm sure it happens. Despite that, this is a good one, worth $1.50.

Disc 30

The Bridge of Sighs, 1936, b&w. Phil Rosen (dir.), Onslow Stevens, Dorothy Tree, Jack La Rue, Mary Doran, Walter Byron, Oscar Apdel, John Kelly, Paul Fix. 1:06.

We open on an astonishing trial scene, set high in a courtroom building—a courtroom that apparently emulates Venice, being connected by a bridge to the jail—thus, the Bridge of Sighs. "Commit perjury and it takes 10 seconds to walk over…and 10 years to walk back!" This as the prosecutor hectors the poor young woman mercilessly…except that it's all an act, as she's his girlfriend (who keeps rejecting his marriage proposal) and court's not in session.

They go off to dinner. She sees someone she recognizes, but who has no time for her. The other man starts to sit down with two men and a woman—but they're about to leave, and he goes with them. The next thing we know, there's a shot, one of the group that just left is dead, the man she'd attempted to talk to runs away—and is captured by a cop responding to the gunfire.

With four eyewitnesses offering the same story, it's a fairly cut-and-dried murder case—during which the prosecutor (the boyfriend) conceals evidence from the defense, which I guess was considered fair practice in 1936. The jury brings back a guilty plea and the man's sentenced to death, albeit at the price of the woman among the foursome going to jail as an accessory (she hid the gun, claiming it was thrust at her).

The first woman's convinced he's innocent and sets about proving it—by getting herself convicted on phony check-kiting charges and being sent to

the same women's prison, where she gets the second woman as a roommate. They wind up escaping thanks to the *actual* killer. Add lots of suspense, an "electric ear" used to bug a hideout, a three-way car chase and a just-in-time happy ending. Lots of action, pretty good dialogue, and a fairly satisfactory early procedural/mystery. Some implausible points—such as a prosecuting attorney immediately taking over a crime scene because he happens to be nearby, and the road from sentencing to actual execution being no more than a couple of months—but never mind. Unfortunately, the sound and picture are both wavery at times, reducing the score to $1.25.

Circumstantial Evidence, 1935, b&w. Charles Lamont (dir.), Chick Chandler, Shirley Grey, Arthur Vinton, Claude King, Dorothy Revier, Lee Moran, Carl Stockdale. 1:07.

A newspaper reporter covering a murder trial along with his girlfriend, the newspaper's sketch artist, is outraged because the defendant can be put to death based solely on circumstantial evidence. So, after proposing to the woman (which she accepts, then tells him that the newspaper's gossip columnist had proposed the night before and been turned down), he decides to prove his point…by staging a mock murder with lots of circumstantial evidence pointing to him, getting arrested, tried and convicted, then showing how absurd the situation is. (Yes, it's a second "getting convicted and sent up in order to right a wrong" flick.)

Right off the bat, that's more than a little hard to take. A whole lot harder: He chooses the *rejected suitor*—who is an "old friend" but also has some fairly odd tastes—as the "victim." Sure, because the other guy couldn't possibly double-cross him or anything… At this point, I'm convinced that the reporter needs a long vacation and some therapy. But he does his thing, with various staged stuff culminating in the "friend" setting an old skeleton he has lying around into the room of his newly purchased country home and covering it with lots of wooden furniture. At this point, the agreement is that the friend will add kerosene-soaked rags and burn the place down, then go off to San Francisco under an assumed name until recalled to show up the situation. Except, except: The friend has a passport under another name and a ticket on a cruise ship to France. Except, except: As he starts the fire (and shoots the reporter's gun into the skeleton to improve the frame), somebody shoots him. Dead.

The rest of the movie runs on from there. We have an over-the-top DA denouncing a signed document admitting the situation as being a probable forgery since the handwriting expert was paid by the defense. We have various shenanigans and, of course, a sort-of happy ending. And I found the whole thing *so* implausible that it was hard to take seriously as a mystery. There's also an issue with the sound: For about 15 minutes in the second half of the film, it's as though it was being recorded from an LP with a bad scratch and loads of surface noise. Still, the acting's amusing; if you don't mind the implausibility, this one might be worth $1.

Convicted, 1931, b&w. Christy Cabanne (dir.), Aileen Pringle, Jameson Thomas, Dorothy Christy, Richard Tucker, Harry Myers, Nike Welch. 1:03 [0:57]

There's something special about mysteries that involve transport—all those great train-based mysteries, some airplane-based mysteries, and a few cruise ship mysteries. Like this one—except that the mystery only seems to occupy about half of an already-short movie and then moves too fast and erratically to be satisfying.

As far as I can figure out, we have a slick type in First Class on a cruise ship (the kind where everybody's formally dressed all day and all night, which I suppose *could* have been true in 1931) who makes a point of greeting a young woman who wants nothing to do with him. He's then approached by another young woman who he wants nothing to do with—but who clearly has unfinished business with him. We also meet an investigative reporter, a drunk and his cabin mate and a few others. As things progress, the reporter encounters the man refusing to let the first woman go and Has Stern Words. There's dancing. The man, the drunk and cabin-mate, some other random passenger and a ship's officer wind up playing poker (the first man losing badly to one person and refusing to pay his losses to another, who he knows was at one point convicted as a cardsharp)—and a couple of hours later, the man's dead: Hit over the head with a blunt instrument but killed by stabbing.

Somehow, the investigative reporter winds up heading up the case and interviewing all those who might have been involved. Suspicion falls on the first young woman—and she later admits to coshing him over the head (but that wasn't what killed him). The captain finds out that the ship had been wired (a wire that never reached its destination) that the man had embezzled $100,000 from his company and was to be arrested—and, oh look, there's some money in the young woman's closet. Oh, by the way, there's another murder, one the woman could not plausibly have been involved in. In any case, the way it plays out means nobody could plausibly have guessed what's going on. And after the mystery's solved, there's another five or ten minutes as the ship docks and we learn that the reporter and the young woman are, he believes, engaged.

All bizarrely staged: They keep reminding us that it's a cruise by having wholly irrelevant scenes on the bridge, about positioning via sextant and calling out headings. There's very little background to understand why or how either woman is or would be involved with the man; in fact, no motivation appears for any character in the movie. Additionally, there's so much background noise on the print that the sound is unpleasant through much of the movie. The movie's title doesn't seem to have anything to do with anything. Maybe the missing six minutes explain everything—but as it is, there's so much idle footage in this flick, that's a little hard to believe. (Looking at the IMDB reviews, I rather like the one that assumes this is

actually a documentary on cruise ship life, interrupted annoyingly with a silly murder plot. I might be more charitably inclined if that was true.) All in all, and most of the rating only for the early shipboard scenes, I can't go above $0.75.

The Devil Diamond, 1937, b&w. Lesslie Goodwins (dir.), Frankie Darro, Kane Richmond, June Gale, Rosita Butler, Robert Fiske. 1:01 [1:00]

I'm not sure whether I could take another Frankie Darro, All-American Kid with a Fast Right, but in any case this movie—about a cursed diamond that a bunch of jewelers want a retired cutter to split into smaller, presumably uncursed stones, and one or two groups planning to steal the jewels—had so many missing syllables and words that I gave up partway through: The quality of the print made it tiresome to try to follow the dialog. I wonder about the IMDB timing—I'd say there was at least a minute's worth of missing footage during the 15 minutes I watched. Unrated.

Putting It Together

So what do we have for the fifth segment of this monster collection? Nothing that I'd consider a classic or near classic (that is, $1.75 or above), but five that are in the general ballpark ($1.50 each): *Big Town After Dark*, *Borderline*, *The Most Dangerous Game*, *Shoot to Kill* and *Blonde Ice*. Admittedly, two of those are repeats from other boxes.

Another six are in the "decent" $1.25 category, with six in the "adequate" $1 slot, for a total of 17 out of 24 that are potentially rewatchable, for a total of $21. You can skip the five movies that are fairly mediocre ($0.75) and certainly the barely-watchable $0.50 (and, to my taste, unwatchable one that didn't get an amount).

Masthead