Cites & Insights

Crawford at Large

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The Front

The Year of Both?

I would love to declare that 2013 is The Year of Both: The year in which sensible people and pundits recognize that both print books and ebooks have substantial roles going forward.

I would love to make that declaration, but as optimistic as I am, I lack any power other than to observe and comment. Still, I think the signs are good—at least for most sensible people, although it may take longer for gurus and pundits (and single-minded folks in general) to admit the possibility.

This issue includes a WORDS piece on the death of print/death of books, and I think the tenor is different from the last time I ran through similar items. I believe there are more thoughtful recognitions that it's likely to be *both* print and ebooks, at least for decades and quite possibly for the truly long term. Some folks go so far as to suggest that different people will have different preferences in general and in specific cases (and that it's OK for people to have different preferences)—and that, even if ebooks seem more sensible in certain roles and print books seem more sensible in others, the ideal is for people to be able to use the form they prefer.

Except, of course, that some books will *require* one form or another. Some books, I suspect more going forward, will rely on linking capabilities and other capabilities a bound set of paper sheets can't support—and some books will take advantage of things done best (or only) on paper. But for most books—I'd guess 90% or more—it really *should* be a matter of personal preference.

I'm aware that a few librarians find this troubling—that they'd love to be freed from all the annoyances of physical books. A few of those will continue to proclaim that the future is inevitably all digital, that we should get over it, that dead trees *must* give way. I suspect they'll be ignored more and more as time goes on. I'm guessing a quiet majority of librarians may welcome a complex future of both print *and* digital resources. I'm guessing a larger number of larger libraries will begin to support two-way transitions: Not only helping digitize print books, but also housing systems to turn PDFs into high-quality printed books on the spot. The systems are available already (and should, cross fingers, get less expensive and easier to maintain). When those systems are in place, libraries can become even better hubs for intellectual and community life, helping their community create and disseminate new works in digital *or* physical format. (Need I mention *The Librarian's Guide to Micropublishing*? It shows how to create a high-quality printed book without new software investments—and a PDF generated using the book's instructions should work just as well on an in-house book-production machine as it does on Lulu.)

I've been a fan of ebooks, *where they work better, for people who prefer them*, for a long time—at least 20 years. In that time, I've been denounced as an anti-ebook Luddite because I haven't embraced a wholesale move to ebooks, because I wasn't willing to spend several hundred dollars of my own money on a Rocket ebook reader (not even heavy enough to serve as a doorstop these days), because I insisted then—and insist now—that print books have a bright future *as long as people want them*.

Inside This Issue

I now own what some would call an ebook reader and others would call an Android tablet: a Kindle Fire HD 8.9. We purchased it for a specific reason: the San Francisco *Chronicle*, which we love and which we've subscribed to for decades, was up to more than $500 a year delivered (I believe it's at $600 now)—and local delivery by the time I get up was getting sketchy. That one-two combo convinced us to go digital *in this case*, and once we looked at devices, readability, and availability of *Chron* sub-

scriptions in a workable format, things boiled down to two choices: a full-size iPad or a Fire HD 8.9, with subscriptions to the *Chron* on either one running $60 to $72 a year. Amazon made our choice easy by putting the Fire HD 8.9 on sale for $250 for a day in late 2012, making the price differential (compared to an iPad with similarly-high resolution) nearly $249.

We've been delighted with the purchase. I "bought" one ebook, *The Complete Works of Sherlock Holmes*, when it was offered for free (since the fiction is in the public domain, that means a free preface and table of contents) just after we received the Kindle. Frankly, I haven't read any of it yet…there are too many library books handy. My wife has read some of it, and my wife thinks she may read some books on the Kindle in the future. So might I, when we're traveling—but so far, after roughly three months, we haven't purchased any. (Technically, that's no longer true: due to some account confusion, an ebook-only "book" I'd acquired for free wouldn't download to my Kindle—and Amazon saw to it that I was able to purchase it for nothing. It was worth every cent. Skimming it on the Kindle was exactly appropriate.) I was gratified and relieved to find that the one-column version of *Cites & Insights* looks *great* on the Fire HD 8.9, and that encouraged me to do a Kindle version of *Give Us a Dollar and We'll Give You Back Four (2012-13).*

Yes, it's easier—or at least faster—to read the San Francisco *Chronicle* on the Kindle's high-definition screen than it is on newsprint. Is it more pleasant? I have mixed feelings. Frankly, if we could get the daily print paper for $100 a year or less (we recycle anyway) and could be assured it would be in the driveway every morning by 6:30 a.m., I'd probably stick with print. But those conditions don't apply and—other than missing ads and some photos—I'm happy enough with the e-version.

As for books? *So far, right now*, I'm mostly sticking with the paper variety. I suspect I'll continue to stick with the paper variety in many or most cases for a very long time. For one thing, I borrow most of my books from the library (and the stock of *available* ebooks from the library is tiny: I've checked).

But as I've said for several years: If I was still speaking at five or six conferences a year, and we were still doing two cruises a year, I'm pretty sure I'd travel with some sort of device to read books. That's still true. It's called a use case.

The year of both—leading to decades of both? I hope so.

About This Issue

The last few issues have been heavy with Serious Essays. The May issue will probably have a big honking essay on the mythical average library.

This issue is a break in the seriousness.

That's deliberate.

I hope you enjoy it.

The Middle
Deathwatch 2013!

Well, not really…most of these are from earlier years. It's apparently been a while since I did a deathwatch roundup—or, rather, it's been just over a year but I didn't include most of the older items I'd already tagged. Let's catch up, noting a range of items that either *include* deathwatches or comment on deathwatches. As usual, "death of print/death of books" isn't included, at least not in this mostly-chronological segment—that silliness deserves separate treatment (see WORDS in this issue).

For those who might wonder, a "deathwatch" is the proclamation that X is dying or dead or obsolete. Sometimes it's on the money, but that's fairly rare, since most technologies and the like don't die readily or rapidly. Deathwatches ares most commonly the result of binary thinking: If A, then Not B. If ebooks thrive, then print books must be dead. If movie streaming thrives, then DVDs must be dead. And so on…

You can choose how seriously you want to take this section. Except as a set of reminders that stuff *doesn't* typically go away just because something new arrives—that new technologies, devices and media typically complement older ones more than replace them—I don't regard all this as terribly important.

There's enough here that I've broken things down into broad categories, plus a set of miscellaneous items.

The Death of the Disc

The death of the disc has been around almost since the first downloadable media became available: MP3 must surely wipe out all CDs in a year or two, streaming video makes DVDs and Blu-rays obsolete…and, in a narrower version, Blu-rays make DVDs obsolete. It's never that simple and certainly not that fast. (You do know that vinyl—that is, analog LPs played on turntables—has been a *growing* business for several years now?)

We Really Don't Need No Stinkin' DVDs…

That's the first part of the title for this November 21, 2010 piece by Mike Melanson at *readwrite.com*; the rest is the actual story: "Netflix Introduces Streaming-Only Plan in U.S." The implication—at least to me—is that DVDs are on the way out. Which, in the *very* long run, may or may not be true (if DVDs include Blu-ray, I'd bet we're talking at least a decade and probably longer).

The key here is in the penultimate paragraph, with Melanson's sense that Everybody Else Is Like Me:

> For those of you who are like me - who consume the majority of their content on devices like their Roku box, their iPhone or iPad sitting in the airport, or on their netbook - the day has finally come. Say it with me - we don't need no stinking DVDs.

In comments, Melanson's a little more nuanced: "Also, DVDs aren't going anywhere quite yet, they're just adding more options. Don't freak out." For us, the Netflix was a blessing: The price of our 3-Blu-ray subscription went *down* by $7 a month since we don't use streaming (to get broadband to the point where streaming would work properly would cost a *lot* of money compared to the combination of limited-basic cable and that 3-Blu-ray subscription).

Where are we more than two years later? Just for fun, I checked Netflix' 4th quarter 2012 spreadsheet. Right now, Netflix is taking a beating on international streaming—it's losing more on that than it's making on domestic streaming, for a net loss of $39 million for 2012.

If you only look at domestic numbers, there are more than three times as many streaming subscribers (25.5 million paid) as disc subscribers (8.0 million) as of the end of 2012—but the *profit* from DVDs is greater than the profit from domestic streaming: $438 million on $1.14 billion gross, compared to $350 million on $2.18 billion gross for domestic streaming. (Add international, and there are 36.4 million paid streaming subscribers—but the resulting $2.47 billion in revenue yields a *loss* of $39 million.)

What I see there is that disc subscribers spend about half again as much (which strikes me as low)—and that they are, as a lot, *considerably* more profitable than the streaming customers. Maybe Netflix is desperate to get rid of its most profitable customers, but I'd be surprised…and I'd be astonished if studios started giving Netflix better deals on streaming. Those proclaiming that legal streaming spells doom for discs seem to confuse the *fact* that internet bandwidth is reasonably cheap and getting cheaper with the *fallacy* that licensing rights to do that streaming wouldn't be major costs or that production companies would charge flat fees for streaming regardless of the number of subscribers served. The real world doesn't work that way.

Film Format Pandemonium

This very good and fairly long November 15, 2010 article by Benjamin Malczewski is at *Library Journal*—and the subtitle makes his overall view fairly clear: "The current landscape of film formats and delivery suggests that libraries lending DVDs are in a very good place—for now, at least."

At the time he wrote this, Netflix rented slightly more DVDs (and Blu-rays) than public libraries loaned. He notes that "many speculate" Netflix plans to move exclusively to streaming in the long term (but note that "long term") and that Redbox might add streaming, which could make libraries the primary lenders of DVDs. He raises the question of whether DVDs will remain relevant and kicks off a good discussion as follows:

> Don't believe the hype. In reading/listening to all the media coverage of the inimitable demise of DVDs, check the author of the obit. Marketers often try to dictate and influence the public by sending urgent messages to shift gears, but retail sales, library circulation, and usability statistics have yet to verify the imminence of such a shift, suggesting, to the contrary, that the future of streaming isn't "now," just yet. DVD sales have been in decline since 2007, but the market is stabilizing, and retail sales of Blu-ray disc players and HDTVs are rising.

There's more, and it's well done. He notes the advantages of discs and says a shift to streaming will be gradual. He also says this:

> To Netflix, DVDs represent major overhead, both in the physical space they consume and their astronomical annual shipping costs, so it behooves the firm to move quickly into the streaming arena. The rest of us have a little more time.

I suspect that's changed somewhat: Streaming now also represents "astronomical" costs for Netflix, and you can be absolutely 100% certain that studios will see to it that those costs rise as Netflix' streaming-only subscriber base rises. That's as it should be.

Breakthrough year for online movies

This one's just a half-page piece in the January 2013 *Home Theater*, but it's remarkable for the divide between the claims in the opening paragraph and the reality of the facts involved. Here's the opening:

> Signaling the beginning of the end for physical media, Americans will likely spend more on legal, Internet-delivered movies than they spend on DVDs

> and Blu-ray Discs for the first time in 2012, according to HIS Screen Digest Research…

There's the deathwatch: "the beginning of the end for physical media." Now let's look at the actual data. Movies on discs should be viewed *more* than movies streamed online—and here's the key quote, which seems at odds with the earlier statement:

> And when it comes to the revenue that keeps Hollywood humming, the disparity is even greater, with online movies expected to bring in $1.7 billion, or about one sixth of the $11.1 billion physical media will generate.

Indeed, the same projections from the same firm suggest that in 2016, online transactions will account for 17% of video transactions—with physical media capturing 75% (the other 8% goes to pay TV).

I can't reconcile the first part of the article with the last part: Apparently, Americans spend six times as much on physical media while spending more on streamed movies. My *guess* is that *Home Theater* confuses transactions with revenue (or an idiot editor omitted "time" following "more" in that sentence). In any case, it's the kind of media death that could (and probably will) take decades.

The "dying craft" of data on discs

This one, by David Sims on January 27, 2011 at *O'Reilly Strata*, is different—it's about a specific *kind* of data on disc, and this is a case where I suspect the deathwatch is appropriate. It's an interview with Ian White of Urban Mapping, one product of which "aggregates data from multiple sources to deliver geographic insights to clients." Traditionally, this sort of service (GIS, geographic information service) delivered data on a CD-ROM. White thinks that's outdated:

> "The notion of receiving a CD in the mail, opening it, reading the manual, it's kind of a dying craft," White said. "It's unfortunate that a lot of companies have built processes around having people on staff to do this kind of work. We can effectively allow those people to work in a higher-value area of the business."

I suspect he's right—and that's probably a good thing.

Why Are People Still Buying CDs?

This January 10, 2013 piece by Todd Wasserman at *Mashable* is typical of the worst sort of technopundit-ry: "How *dare* you idiots continue to buy something that *we've told you is dead*?" The writer uses Amazon's AutoRip as a springboard—Amazon's service that "gives consumers a cloud-based backup for every CD they've bought from the company since 1998." Of course, AutoRip *isn't* a backup; it's a medium-fidelity MP3 alternative. But that's not Wasserman's take:

> Why are people still buying CDs in 2013? After all, most music is available online in a format that's usually cheaper than CDs and doesn't take up shelf space.
>
> Yet, the CD is still the predominant format for music buying. Consumers bought 193 million CDs in 2012 vs. 118 million digitally downloaded albums, according to Nielsen SoundScan. Though digital continues to grow at a rapid clip, it will probably be a couple of years before CD buyers become the minority. There's also reason to believe that CDs will still hold a significant share of the market for some time.

Wasserman offers reasons for what he clearly considers to be aberrant behavior, including this odd paragraph:

> Though there's some debate on the issue, David Bakula, SVP of client development for Nielsen, believes that the sound quality of downloaded music isn't on par with music on a CD. However, it's worth noting that the quality of older CDs may actually be worse now than a decade or so ago thanks to the so-called Loudness War that prompted engineers to apply a high rate of compression to old recordings to make them louder.

I know of very little serious "debate" as to whether typical MP3 downloads offer sound quality as good as CD or vinyl: No, they don't, although many people either don't hear or don't care about the difference. The Loudness War reference is just *wrong*: The problem is engineers who compress the dynamic range of *newer* recordings. A mediocre MP3 version of a CD with poor dynamic range is going to sound even less good.

The other reasons? "Technology lag"—us country bumpkins haven't figured out buying downloads yet. (Actually, the article specifically mentions country music.) Also cars and "tangibility"—some of us like physical packages. But Wasserman's a proper digiphile: he closes with three questions to provoke comments, including this one (relating to people buying CDs): "Are you still mystified that other people do?"

There weren't many comments—36 in all—and a considerable majority of them are from people who still buy CDs (or LPs), along with one or two sneering comments from those who can't believe anybody still does. Oddly, a few people raise DRM as the reason to buy CDs rather than downloads, even though MP3s have *never* had DRM and even Apple eventually dropped DRM in its music downloads.

…the Diskette, on the other hand…

Thus saith Jason Scott, in a July 12, 2011 post at *ASCII*: "Floppy Disks: It's Too Late." By "floppy

disks" he means the 5¼" ones that "actually are somewhat floppy," not the hardshelled 12cm microdiskettes. What he's saying is significant: Not that 5¼" diskettes are no longer being actively used—but that the data on them may very well be *irretrievable*.

> It's over. You waited too long. You procrastinated or made excuses or otherwise didn't think about it or care. You didn't do anything and it's too late now.

I'm pretty sure he's right—and he's spending his time trying to preserve old digital media, so he's likely to know. He thinks 12cm microdiskettes (the hardshell ones) are getting there, too—and there, I wonder whether he's too optimistic. In my limited experience, many computers, in the last years when microdiskette drives were included with every computer, had drives that were so marginal that diskettes written on them could rarely be read on any other machine—and not always on the *same* machine. They were, in other words, write-only media: The data goes in and it never comes out.

It's a long post (and, being written by Jason Scott, moderately profane) with a message: People who still have caches of floppies with stuff on them they care about should contact him, for a last chance at retrieving *some* of what's on them. He's particularly concerned about caches of unique data at libraries and archives.

I'm old enough to remember *true* floppies, 8" diskettes (5¼" are actually minidiskettes), but that really was a long time ago.

Requiem for the MiniDisc

That's by Miles Raymer on February 4, 2013 at *the Bleader* (or, I guess, "the Bleader" section of *Chicago Reader*). This is a case—as with diskettes—where I think a requiem is appropriate, although this appears to be as much an elegy as a requiem. Sony's announced that it won't produce new MiniDisc components, and in the U.S. the format never really gained much of a foothold. I didn't realize it had been around so long: Since 1992.

MiniDisc might have made sense as a home recording medium. It never amounted to much as a CD replacement, since it wasn't *that* much more portable and offered inferior sound quality. But for high-quality audio recording on the cheap, including live surreptitious concert recording: Great!

The short piece gets one detail wrong (noted in the comments): originally, the sound quality *was* inferior to CD, although that changed in later years. Realistically, the MiniDisc was a higher-quality competitor to audiocassettes—and eventually, given the rise of relatively inexpensive solid-state memory, it had to be doomed.

The iPad?

Really? Well, not really...despite the silly headline: "Forrester: Amazon's tablet will bury the iPad." It's an August 29, 2011 item by Philip Elmer-DeWitt at *CNNMoney*'s "Apple 2.0" subsite, which means it's hardly likely to be übercritical of Apple products—but it's actually, apparently, a *Fortune* site.

It's citing a research report by a Forrester analyst that includes this statement: "A year from now, 'Amazon' will be synonymous with 'Android' on tablets." And, apparently, that Kindles would outsell iPads.

Actually, when you link through to the blog summary of the Forrester report, it's clear that Elmer-DeWitt (or a headline writer) has been liberal with the truth, given that the set of bullet points is preceded by this:

> Amazon's quick ascension in the tablet market will completely disrupt the status quo. Apple will retain dominant market share…

So the iPad will be buried while retaining dominant market share? Interesting… The rest, of course, assumes that the Kindle Fire would be a general-purpose Android tablet, which doesn't appear to be the case. Since Amazon continues to decline to state actual sales figures, we really don't know how the Fire (and Fire HD and Fire HD 8.9) is doing. I *will* assert that nobody knowledgeable about Android considers "Kindle" to be synonymous with "Android tablet."

Radio

Oh, come on. TV killed radio decades ago. Right? Or not…

Are the likes of Pandora poised to kill AM/FM radio?

Even *ars technica* likes to get into the deathwatch business, although frequently with a question rather than a statement, as in this November 2, 2010 piece by Matthew Lasar—which ups the ante with its subheading: "Does AM/FM radio stand a chance of surviving the digital landscape? The latest …"

Let's pass on the first sentence, even though it's utter nonsense: "Everybody knows that Internet streaming music services have claimed a huge chunk of the radio listening market over the last decade." Unless "Everybody" means "everybody hip enough to read *ars technica* avidly," that's just stupid. I bet that, if you ask 100 ordinary people, let's say half of

them over 30, that most of them not only wouldn't know that, they wouldn't care. And if you ask, say, 1,000 car-driving commuters whether AM/FM radio stands a chance, I'm going to guess that at least 25% of them will look at you as if you've gone crazy.

The story relies heavily on an Edison Research survey with enough responses to possibly be reasonably accurate on overall measures (but less so as you split out demographic groups). Let's assume that it's 100% accurate. What does it tell us? Here's a damning paragraph—not in what it says, but in how it's interpreted:

> For example, 20 percent of consumers age 12 to 24 say they listened to Pandora radio over the last month, according to the study. And one in three have tried the service. In comparison, only *six percent* of the same cohort told Edison that they listened to online streams from AM/FM radio over the last week.

My reactions? First, 20% seems pretty low. Second, that last sentence shouldn't begin with "In comparison"—because it's not comparable. Heck, I certainly don't listen to online streams from AM/FM radio once a week—but I do listen to FM radio at least once a week. Over the, you know, *radio* (in our car, mostly). There's also the equation of once a month for Pandora with once a week for streaming radio, but that's just confounding an already silly comparison.

Later, we get another silly comparison. In 2000, "young listeners" were on the internet about an hour a day but listened to "terrestrial radio" (what? the internet comes from Mars?) about 2:43 per day. Now, ten years later, "young media consumers" spend 2:52 on the internet and 1:14 listening to radio. (Sigh: they spend 2:47 watching TV.)

I'm not sure why the incessant focus on very young consumers (there are no citizens, only consumers), but that set of comparisons is also odd…because there's a lot to do on the internet besides listening to music. "Kids spend a lot more time on the internet in 2010 than they did in 2000." Well, sure. So do most adults, I'd guess.

Bizarrely, the article then talks about "rays of hope for over-the-air radio" and says this: "Note that although terrestrial audio has been outpaced by the 'Net, young people are actually listening to it more than they did in 2000." But…but…if by "terrestrial audio" you mean broadcast radio, that flatly contradicts the earlier figures (remember? 2:43 in 2000, 1:14 in 2010). Or maybe "terrestrial audio" includes TV?

The rest of the article basically says broadcast radio is still vitally important for finding new music and concert information. It's mostly a non-story.

Personally? When I *do* listen to broadcast radio, it's almost always the local public radio station—and it's almost always in the car. And, since *everybody else is exactly like me*… well, actually, KQED-FM is one of the highest-rated stations in the Bay Area, but that still doesn't mean much. Naturally, most commenters, being *ars technica* readers, were all about the streaming, and a few of them seem to assume that since they don't listen, radio's probably already defunct. (Hmm. I should note that, when I'm having lunch at a casual restaurant, radio is frequently playing…and it's almost always the local station. The same station is on at the hairdresser's, at Trader Joe's, at other local stores and casual restaurants.)

Magazines

Sales of print magazines *on newsstands* have shown declines in the past year or three—not consistently, not always, but in many or most cases. Advertising pages in print magazines have had declines—again, not consistently, not always, but in many cases, *especially* for the third or fourth or sixteenth largest magazine within a niche. Meanwhile, *subscriptions* seem to be doing just fine, by and large—again, with lots of exceptions, especially for suicidal magazines (those intent on making the print version little but ads and a set of pointers to online resources, or those that have made themselves irrelevant, e.g. *Newsweek*).

But it's part of the consistent "if it ain't digital, it's toast" message to dismiss print magazines as dead or dying. Thus we get things like the opening sentence of Gina Gotthilf's February 9, 2011 *Mashable* piece, "7 Ways Print Magazines Are Using Social Media to Engage Readers":

> The demise of print media is commonly attributed to the success of free, easily accessible digital media.

The demise of print media—not only is it (*all* print media—books, magazines, newspapers) dying, *it's dead*. Which, of course, makes the remainder of this article absurd: How can dead magazines be using social media? (The article's odd if only because Gotthilf clearly thinks bunches'o'links are *far* superior—"an editorial journey for readers"—to having a boring old "linear reading experience.")

Websites

After 20 Years, Is The Website About to Become Extinct?

Richard MacManus asks that question in a June 9, 2011 item at *ReadWrite*. I'm a little astonished to see that the deathwatcher is Jim Boulton, part of the

Library of Congress Web Archiving Team. Here's what he says:

> "In a few year's time there won't be such a thing as a website," claimed Boulton. "With the rise of the social Web, now online experiences are built around the individual rather than around the organization."

Huh? Oh, and it's going to come to you on "devices like smartphones." Now, if Boulton claimed that websites would be *less dominant* in a few year's time, maybe it would be an interesting extrapolation. But that's not what he said. "There won't be such a thing as a website" is, well, bizarre.

MacManus wasn't buying it: He didn't see his own site going away any time soon.

The Semantic Web/Web 3.0

In "Triple bypass—What does the death of the semantic web mean for publishers?" (by Richard Padley on September 20, 2011 at *semantico*), we get a brief homily on the death of something that maybe never really got born.

> Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to mark the end of an era. I'm talking about the passing of Web 3.0 – ostensibly the era of the next great revolution in the information industry.
>
> In its short life the semantic web we knew so little passed through the peak of inflated expectation, went round the cape of unrealistic ambition and finally found a resting place in the great junkyard of unwanted technology in the virtual cloud. At one time our information industry seemed to have the most to gain (or lose) from the threats and opportunities presented by our recently lost friend. So, what went wrong?

Padley regards the semantic web as dead because Google, Yahoo and Microsoft collaborated to launch schema.org—"a collection of schemas, i.e., html tags, that webmasters can use to markup their pages in ways recognized by major search providers." The site helps make it possible to restore structure lost on the way to HTML, or more specifically "rich snippets." If the semantic web and RDF really took off, that might not be necessary, but the search engine builders have concluded that they don't need RDF, that ordinary HTML is good enough.

> For years semantic web purists have been preaching that the future is all about RDF and triples. Yet, in the 12 years that theorists have been working on the semantic web, we've yet to see many convincing practical uses for the technology. The graph I've included above shows the rise and fall of Web 2.0 job postings compared to job posts requiring semantic web technologies. This makes a pretty clear case that the semantic web simply never took off.

The graph is amusing and has been updated since the post: the Web 2.0 line grows mightily in mid-2010 to mid-2011 then starts to taper off…but the lines for "web 3.0," "RDF" and "semantic web" never move significantly off the zero axis.

Padley notes that semantic web methodologies have niche applications—but also, correctly I believe, that it's never taken off in the broader web. I was introduced to the Semantic Web by Sir Berners-Lee himself (before he was a Sir), and I didn't believe it would be a world-changer at the time: It simply required—and requires—too much work on the part of those of us who provide content. Writing's hard enough; converting everything into triples just isn't going to happen for most of us.

Second Life

I have mixed feelings about Dan and Chip Heath, but this November 8, 2011 *Slate* column, "Why Second Life Failed," is amusing if only for the comments. And I would bet that, if I had a really broad readership among librarians, at least two or three of them would already be firing up "WHO SAYS SECOND LIFE HAS FAILED?!!!" messages. (The column's an excerpt from yet another Heath brothers secrets-to-assured-business-success book.)

The Heaths assert that Second Life was *supposed* to be a really big thing—cover story in *Business Week*, etc. I can buy that: I remember seeing loads of programs at library conferences about how essential it was that libraries build Second Life presences. That was 2006.

> Looking back, the future didn't last long. By the end of 2007, Second Life was already losing its fizz. "Businesses are shuttering in Second Life, it seems, because no one is using them," wrote Morgan Clendaniel in a brutal piece in GOOD magazine. "There were never any employees at stores like Dell and Reebok when I visited, nor were there any customers. But that wasn't that shocking because, for the most part, there seems to be no one in Second Life at all."

Technically, Second Life is still around. In the first half of 2011, it averaged about one million users logged in *every month*, to which the Heaths add "which, you have to admit, is about 999,990 more than you expected." (I find it remarkably difficult to find any real usage statistics about Second Life, at least *past* 2011, but the "one million per month" figure may still apply. In which case the Heaths' "limps along" is appropriate.) Most of the entry is about another Hot Business

Guru's supposed methodology for determining which overhyped new things will actually make it—Clay Christensen being the hotshot this time. I won't bore you with that discussion. "Second Life is a bizarre solution for which there is no clear problem" might be my own summary, but that's not buzzwordy enough for business gurus.

What's fun about this item is the comments—the repeated fervent (and sometimes semiliterate) statements of just *how alive and healthy* Second Life actually is. Of course, LindenLabs' methodology assures that *some* measures will show it as healthy: Once you log on to Second Life, even once, you're forever a resident. You can leave Facebook, but Second Life is like Hotel CaliforniaIn fact, Second Life isn't dead…but it's a narrow little world that matters *hugely* to relatively few people.

Blogs

If websites are dead, then so are blogs—automatically, since blogs *are* websites. If not, well, something else must have killed them by now (despite odd refereed articles claiming that library blogging is on the rise).

Repent, ye bloggers—the end is nigh: Google+ is coming to annihilate you

Shel Holtz wrote this on July 13, 2011 at *Ragan's PR Daily*, but he's not the one making the "blog killer" claim—his first paragraph suggests his own take:

> In the world of social media, nothing can ever be merely affected. It has to be killed. Slaughtered. Eviscerated. Massacred.

Apparently Google+ was destined to kill *lots* of things—but then, lots of things killed blogs (including Quora!). Twitter killed blogs, and if it didn't, Google+ did. Just ask Rich Levin in a July 11, 2011 post on (wait for it) Google+: "Google+: Killer of Blogs."

Since Levin offed his own blog in favor of Twitter, he's referring to other high-profile bloggers (and it's pretty damn clear that only *high-profile* people are of any concern for folks like Levin). Levin says:

> So is blogging about to die? Will Google+ hold the bloody axe? It's starting to look that way, especially considering the pack mentality of the digerati. If more key influencers make the move, the masses will follow. Blogger.com and WordPress.com could become vast wastelands (some would argue they already are).

The digerati. Nobody else matters, only the "key influencers." I'm sure you make all your decisions based on what Thought Leaders say, don't you? ("Key influencers" are like Thought Leaders or Digerati.)

Holtz goes on to offer his reasons that blogs won't succumb to a social networking tool. It's a pretty good list, even for those of us who don't care about SEO.

In July 2011, it was apparently plausible to believe that Google+ was going to conquer *everything*. In March 2013, maybe not so much. (Yes, I have a Google+ account. In a way, it's refreshing—it makes Friendfeed look busy by comparison.)

Windows

Five Reasons why Google's Linux Chromebook is a Windows killer

That's Steven J. Vaughan-Nichols on May 11, 2011 at *ZDNet*. He says there's no question that the Chromebooks—which supposedly came on the market in June 2011—were aimed right at the Windows business desktop market and, in his opinion, would kill Windows. Why?

- Attractive business packaging and pricing—he believes $28 a month for continuous OS updating is a *great deal*. (Now if it's $28 a month for the notebook *and* the OS, maybe…but I don't see any such offers in the real world.)
- Ease of use—compared to what? Chrome OS is essentially the Chrome browser, so…
- Lots of applications—by which he seems to mean that you can rent virtualized Windows applications running on Chrome.
- Security—maybe.
- Google brand recognition—because, y'know, Microsoft is a Johnny-come-lately.

> Dare I say it? I think for the first time in decades, Microsoft is facing real trouble on the desktop. Seem unlikely? Remember when everyone used Internet Explorer and then along came Firefox? I see the desktop market at a similar tipping point.

When I was checking on Chromebook "$28 a month" deals, the second non-sponsored result on a non-Google search site was a link to an *Infoworld* piece from June 2011: "Whatever you do, don't buy a Chromebook." I'm guessing a *lot* of businesses are not willing to have their entire business computing operation on the Cloud, your only real option with the Chromebook, which is more an intelligent terminal than it is a computer.

The latest I've seen is that Chromebooks may be the most successful Linux computers—but that's not saying a lot. The most recent OS market share information I've seen shows *all* Linux variants, including Chrome OS, totaling around 1.2% of the market.

Oh, and poor dead Internet Explorer? As of March 1, 2013 (reflecting February 2013 data), if you believe Net Applications as reported at *The Next Web*, it's once again (or still) the browser of choice for a *majority* of users—55.8%—while Chrome is down to 16.3%. (Me? I use Firefox and have for years.)

Icons

It's not a deathwatch really; it's an odd little post by Scott Hanselman, on May 9, 2012 at *Scott Hanselman's Computer Zen*: "The Floppy Disk means Save, and 14 other old people Icons that don't make sense anymore." Apparently this Microsoft employee really hates skeuomorphism and offers illustrations of 15 icons that *he* regards as not making sense. Apparently he believes car radios with buttons, clipboards, folders, traditional phone handsets, envelopes, screwdrivers and wrenches, and rabbit-ear antennas are all things *only old people* would even be aware of. Since nobody under 50 (I'm not sure what Hanselman's definition of "old people" is—maybe 15?) has ever seen any of these antiques, computer icons shouldn't be modeled after them.

A few commenters ask what he suggests to replace them—e.g., what says "Save" in a more current fashion than a diskette? (I loved one comment that referred to car radios that "used to have buttons where only one could be pressed at any time" and wonders what happens when he now pushes two at once, which he presumably can.) Hanselman's a little weak on facts anyway, as in this wonderful sentence that more than one commenter called him on:

> Last time I made a carbon copy I was using a mimeograph to do it.

Which is pretty amazing, if you ask me—or, rather, dead wrong. *Of course* he dismisses print books as "dead trees"—that's pretty much a given.

Email

I've somehow subscribed to *Fast Company* for years to come—and, while I thought it had improved from its early cultish days, sometimes I can't tell whether it's becoming the next *Wired* or returning to its cultish ways. Take this article (please)…

Email Is The New Pony Express—And It's Time To Put It Down

That's by Ryan Holmes on October 16, 2012 at *Fast Company*, and maybe it's only *supposed* to be about corporate email, given this tease:

> Email, like paper letters delivered by horseback, has become an unproductivity tool and may just be the biggest time killer in the modern workplace. Here's where companies are headed next.

The piece begins with a French IT company whose CEO "banned email" in early 2011—actually just discouraging employees from using *internal* email. His goal was to "eradicate email within 18 months." Supposedly, the results have been a reduction in message volume of 20% (around 18 months later), which may count as "eradication" in some circles.

The second paragraph clarifies things—and causes me to wonder whether this is an article or an advertorial (in *Fast Company*, the wall between editorial and advertising does not appear to exist):

> Email is familiar. It's comfortable. It's easy to use. But it might just be the biggest killer of time and productivity in the office today. I'll admit my vendetta is personal. I run a company, HootSuite, which is focused on disrupting how the world communicates using social media. Yet each day my employees and I send each other thousands of emails, typing out addresses and patiently waiting for replies like we were mailing letters on the Pony Express.

So you're trying to disrupt communication and thus are in a good position to write an article about why a methodology *should* be disrupted—even though you're clearly unable to do so *in your own small company*!

Holmes provides convincing evidence that email is dying, if you're one of those who believes that current trends among 18-24 year olds are *universal truths*: Namely, these young adults appear to be spending less time with email.

Holmes has Solutions, of course—and here I must apologize for including a link to a *Fast Company* article, as its devotion to *advertising at all costs* makes it damnably difficult to finish reading even a brief article online (full-page ads keep sliding over the text). I won't bother with his solutions, partly because they seem to be based on synchronicity (and *lack* of synchronicity is one of email's virtues) and partly because I think they boil down to "email is not an ideal universal solution, therefore it's toast." Which, by the way, also means Holmes' company is toast, since clearly we *should* be spending all our time in Facebook, since it is the closest thing to a universal solution we have. This week, at least.

Ebooks

I'm cheating here: This is really about one specific case of format rot and it's a good if relatively brief post on a serious topic.

Format rot in ebook preservation

The post is by Chad Haefele, posted November 5, 2012 at *Hidden Peanuts*, and it's about Hypercard novels from Eastgate. The ones he has are on microdiskettes. Naturally, they're Mac-only—but only *older* Macs, and only if the Macs have Hypercard. Which, as Haefele notes, stopped working with OS X in 2005.

There's a more general issue here:

> I have no idea if these ebooks are any good, or hold any value at all beyond being curiosities of early ebook publishing. I'm not going to put any more effort into getting them running unless I'm given a compelling reason. But this is a real issue, and one that will only become more important in time. I think of the huge quantities of CD & DVD resources we still have at work, and I shudder a bit. Apple removed the CD-ROM drive from the latest imac, and other manufacturers can't be far behind.
>
> If anything, this experience has drilled into my head that I need to keep an eye out for mission critical resources on old formats. I'll migrate them forward when I can, but that won't always be possible. I'm bullish on ebooks in general, but when it comes to preservation paper still wins.

Eastgate is still around with a site that features a blurb calling it "the primary source for serious hypertext." Given how well hypertext *as a format for books or narratives* has done, that's probably true.

Literacy

I've grumped about this particular piece of long-term deathwatching previously—Michael Ridley's *Beyond Literacy* project. I thought the introductory chapters (all provided in, of course, *text*) were over the top and said so. I even went so far as to modify about 2% of the words in the introduction and post them as an alternative that would be less contentious and perhaps more interesting. And at the time, I began to think Ridley was being deliberately provocative—that he couldn't *actually* believe "reading and writing are doomed; literacy as we know it is over."

I was, apparently, wrong. The project's final chapters have been posted and in the conclusion to the "book" Ridley says:

> Do I really believe literacy is doomed? Yes. Do I think this is a cause for concern? Yes. And No. Will I feel a sense of loss when it happens? Perhaps.

Do I find myself able to take Ridley seriously at this point? No. Do I believe textual literacy is in any danger at all, at least for the next few decades or centuries? Absolutely not. Do I believe this is somehow limiting or problematic? No. (Ridley quotes Ray Kurzweil in support of his thesis. Kurzweil as a reliable guide to the future or present ranks right up there with Nicholas Negroponte.) Do I believe that text is the best approach for all forms of communication? No, and never have.

But enough of what I had to say…

Beyond 'Beyond Literacy'

That's Lane Wilkinson on November 2, 2012 at *Sense and Reference*. He points to the introduction, says to go read it, then…

> Back already? Dang, that was quick. It's almost as if you only read part way down the Beyond Literacy introduction before yelling "NO, DAMN IT, NO!" with such force that your browser ran back here to hide. And, you know, if you're a librarian, having a knee-jerk reaction is entirely justifiable. I mean, Ridley has got to be trolling us, right? The very first claims he makes are: "reading and writing are doomed" and "literacy as we know it is over." What the heck!? Well, in his defense, I think that a visceral reaction to a clearly provocative theory is kind of the point. Beyond Literacy is a thought-experiment: it's meant to test our intuitions and make us think about literacy from a novel, if not original, position. Thought-experiments have enormous pedagogical value and, what's more, they can be kind of fun, too. After all, asking what the world would be like without literacy isn't all that different from asking what the world would be like with zombies, and we certainly enjoy doing that. At least, we sometimes do…

In case you're not clicking as you go, that link at "knee-jerk reaction" is to what I'd consider a fairly well thought out reaction from a non-librarian, namely Walt Crawford (although the knee-jerk part probably relates to a quick and slightly intemperate comment I made at Friendfeed, where I mistakenly thought I could be spontaneous among friends). But never mind… In the next paragraph, Wilkinson says this:

> Though I appreciate the sincerity that Ridley brings to Beyond Literacy, I think the entire project fails on account of its argumentative structure, its methodological foundations, an extremely limited interpretation of 'literacy', and a general inconsistency in both terminology and presentation.

That's very early in a *long* post, quite possibly longer than the first half of the "book" that Wilkinson's commenting on. (I didn't read *all* of the eleven chapters that have appeared since then; the three or four I tried are so scattered over various topics, few having much of anything to do with text literacy, that I gave it up as a bad idea).

Late in the post, Wilkinson says this:

> I could probably poke holes in Beyond Literacy all day, but I think I'll take a rest. Please don't think I am entirely dismissive of post-literacy; I'm really curious about the future of language. I'm just hesitant about accepting absolute statements about the future when their only evidence is vague, incoherent, or post hoc. Sure, I suppose that reading books could eventually be supplanted by something else entirely. I also suppose that we may yet find technologies that improve on print or that augment our interactions with the printed word. But, I'm highly skeptical that we'll get rid of reading and writing as a major form of communication. After all, despite the theories of McLuhan, Ong, Goody, our print culture hasn't exactly snuffed out spoken language yet.

Interesting. In writing this piece—and seeing that "knee-jerk reaction" link again—I wound up reviewing the entire thread on Friendfeed. Yes, my original reaction was intemperate (and caused partly by pure envy as to which projects can get library-related grant funding and which can't), but it's interesting to see how much of the discussion assumes that Ridley was mostly engaging in hyperbole for the sake of discussion—which, given his concluding essay, seems less likely now. Oh, and the troll in the discussion? The three comments in that thread are the only comments that account has ever made. Ever. It was pure trolling.

Colleges and Universities

I do not plan to deal with MOOCs, funny as the name is, because…well, because. I neither despise nor celebrate them. I'm just not that interested at this point, and have *way* more than enough to write about as is. But I found this piece striking, if a bit improbable:

How California's Online Education Pilot Will End College As We Know It

By Gregory Ferenstein on January 15, 2013 at *TechCrunch*. No equivocation here: not "may," not "reduce the influence of," not "affect"—but *will end*. Because of a pilot project by CSU (which he calls "the largest university system in the world"—and I suppose it is, although CSU campuses can only grant PhDs in conjunction with the University of California) to offer $150 online lower-division courses at one campus. The campus is San Jose State, it's a deal with Udacity and the courses are remedial and introductory courses. The pilot's limited to 300 students.

And to Ferenstein, it's *the end*—and boy, does he tell us something about his credentials and self-worth in a portion of the first paragraph:

> As someone who has taught large courses at a University of California, I can assure readers that my job could have easily been automated. Most of college–the expansive campuses and large lecture halls–will crumble into ghost towns as budget-strapped schools herd students online.

Anyone who says "at a University of California" could *use* an online remedial course, and I do pity students who had a faculty member who felt he could be replaced by a computer.

It's a remarkably snotty little article—Ferenstein apparently despises undergrads and academia equally—and seems to regard *all* of "our education system," higher education presumably included, as "primarily designed to test rote memorization." Ferenstein's own writing ability shows up again in this sentence: "Online courses aren't entirely new, but it's difficult to underestimate just how powerful the California higher education system is." Based on the rest of the paragraph, I'll confidently say that he meant *over*estimate.

Anyway, he offers a six-step "timeline" (with no dates attached—he's not a complete fool): The pilot succeeds; adjuncts get laid off; community colleges close; humanities departments disappear; grad programs disappear; "competency-based measures" show that online students do great; a few Ivy League universities "begin to control most of the online content" (what? UC and Stanford don't have any world-class faculty?); and actual in-person learning "returns to its elite roots."

I can't prove he's wrong. I *hope* he is. I believe that I probably learned almost as much from being *on the Berkeley campus and among my peers and betters* as I did in the classroom. Clearly online courses have their place (and have had for many years—SJSU's LIS program, for example, is pretty much entirely online), but seeing them as an overall replacement for physical campuses strikes me as dystopian.

More than 200 comments. I didn't read most of them. I did look at a few more of Ferenstein's pieces—ending up with his trashing of the field in which he failed as a graduate student, political science. I know that if *I* fail in a field, *the field must be worthless*. I couldn't *possibly* be to blame.

Newsweek

If you believe Tina Brown should be taken seriously, this could be "Print Magazines," as she seems to think that 10,000 other magazines (that's just *newsstand* magazines in the U.S.) are bound to abandon print for digital. Of course, Brown doesn't cast it as

the death of *Newsweek*—she is apparently convinced that the digital version will be a winner. But not so "Mr. Magazine," Samir Husni. (It turns out that print *Newsweek* is only dead in the U.S.; a number of overseas editions continue to publish.)

Killing Me Softly With Her "Talk": Why Tina Brown's 10 Excuses for Killing Newsweek Are ALL DEAD WRONG

That's the title of Husni's December 31, 2012 post at *Mr. Magazine*, in which he takes apart editor Tina Brown's ~~reasons~~ excuses for *Newsweek* failing as a print newsweekly.

> The content of Newsweek for the last two years, from Princess Di at 50, to the First Gay President, to the famous sexy food cover, are three examples of how content (i.e. bad content, irrelevant content to a magazine's audience, etc.) can and will lead to your demise. Remember Talk?

Husni quotes ten excerpts from Brown's editorial in the final print issue and comments caustically on each of them. It's an interesting read. Personally, much as I love good print magazines and believe they'll be around for a very long time, I've been surprised that there are still several print newsweeklies, since that specific niche seems to be a difficult one to make work. Two of the remaining four are, to be sure, business-oriented, *The Economist* and *Bloomberg Businessweek*. That last one is perhaps most interesting: Its former publisher basically gave it up as a bad idea, selling it to Bloomberg for $1. And it's apparently thriving.

PCs

Since Windows is dead (see earlier), can PCs themselves—that is, desktop and notebook devices having local storage and running an operating system, whether Windows, OS X or a Linux variant—be far behind?

Cloud threatens to end PC's reign

So say Richard Waters and Chris Nuttall "in San Francisco," reporting on June 10, 2011 at the *FT Tech Hub*. When I attempt to copy-and-paste a key paragraph, I get a stern warning telling me not to do so, so I won't quote much. The reporters say Apple has "shown the way" to a "post PC world" with the iPhone and iPad—and stepped up the game with the iCloud. Then the reporters 'fess up: "Post-PC" is a "gross exaggeration of the decline of the hardy personal computer" but a "helpful reminder of how the PC's dominant influence over the way people live their digital lives is rapidly waning."

Given 400 million PC sales in 2011 and continuing rising sales, the deathwatch is absurd. Given the influence of tablets and other devices for the wealthy and for those who really don't need desktop/notebook capabilities, the secondary issue is probably right: In a few years, the majority of "personal computing" may not use traditional PCs. So? The rest of the article is mostly sales blather (e.g., if people buy more smartphones than PCs, that means…well, *nothing at all*, but never mind).

I guess some reporters need to punch up not only the headline for a story but its finish. Thus, after a story that says pretty conclusively that PCs aren't going anywhere, we get an Apple person blathering about running digital devices without hooking them up to PCs and this closing: "For the venerable personal computer, it sounded like one more nail in the coffin."

The PC is Over

Jeff Atwood's October 1, 2012 post at *Coding Horror* begins by quoting MC Siegler saying:

> The PC is over. It will linger, but increasingly as a relic.
>
> I now dread using my computer. I want to use a tablet most of the time. And increasingly, I can. I want to use a smartphone all the rest of the time. And I do.
>
> The value in the desktop web is increasingly an illusion. Given the rate at which these mobile devices are improving, a plunge is rapidly approaching.

Siegler *dreads* using his computer? Really? "Desktop web" makes no sense at all (except that Siegler seems to be saying everything should be apps)—and it's clear Siegler is of the "if it ain't dominant, it's dead" camp of hyperbolic writing. Oh, and the "because I am X, therefore everybody is X" mindset—we *all* have tablets, we *all* really want to use either tablets or smartphones.

And Atwood, while first noting that this is hyperbole, goes right down the same path—by redefining "PC" as monster desktops and noticing that he's lost interest in upgrades. Here's an interesting paragraph—*some of which* I agree with:

> I think we're way past the point of satisfying the computing performance needs of the typical user. I'd say we hit that around the time dual CPU cores became mainstream, perhaps 2008 or so. What do you do when you have all the computing performance anyone could ever possibly need, except for the freakish one-percenters, the video editors and programmers? Once you have "enough" computing power, for whatever value of "enough" we can agree

> to disagree on, the future of computing is, and always has been, to make the computers smaller and cheaper. This is not some new trend that MG Siegler revealed unto the world from his journalistic fortress of solitude.

I didn't add that emphasis. And that right there is the face of inevitability—it's *the future*. Period. The part I agree with? That we're way past the point where most computers more than satisfy most computing needs. That's why my "desktop" is a 4.5-year-old Gateway notebook that was a bargain machine when I purchased it. *But*…it's connected to a 19" display (using its own 15" as a second screen) and I use a full-size, even over-size Microsoft Natural wireless keyboard and mouse. And, as a writer and web user, I'm not planning to give those up for a 9" or 10" screen (delightful as the Kindle Fire HD 8.9's screen is) and virtual keyboard.

If I wasn't a writer, I might. And if Siegler's claiming that PC sales are likely to drop at some point, I might agree. But that doesn't mean the PC is "over" except as the dominant device. He has a companion (earlier) piece, "The Last PC Laptop," in which he alternates between drooling over his ultrabook and basically saying he doesn't want anything more than a tablet and smartphone any more. And, of course, implying that because he doesn't, *neither should anybody else*.

Cash

I've seen suggestions in various places that cash—that is, actual bills and coins, and probably checks as well—is dying or should be killed in favor of doing *everything* electronically. It's a little unfair to cite Sarah Jacobsson Purewal's "The Privacy and Security Implications of a Cashless Society" in the January 2013 *PC World*, but given the tease and opening, it's hard not to.

The tease: "Are we headed toward a cashless future, and, if so, what happens when every transaction leaves our identity open?" The opening—especially that first question: "*When was the last time you used cash to pay for something?* If you're like many Americans today, you pay with cash a lot less frequently than you used to…" [Emphasis added.]

I know my answer to the question—and it's almost always either "today" or "yesterday." We pay cash at the farmers' market (except when buying fish in more-than-$20 transactions). I pay cash at my favorite Chinese restaurant for lunch, ditto at the pizza place for lunch, ditto at Subway, ditto at…well, at most places where I have less-than-$10 lunches.

Not that I disagree with the second sentence in the opening—I suspect *most* Americans pay with cash less frequently "than you used to," especially since "used to" could go back a long distance. We use credit cards for most sizable transactions, certainly including groceries and gas (*never* debit cards for purchases), in part because we get back at least 1% on the purchases (and if we could earn anything on savings, the float of a month or more when your credit card bills are paid automatically from checking account would also be valuable: autopay systems seem to always pay on the final due date, where I used to send checks as soon as I got the bills).

The fairly brief article talks about identify and security, then concludes "cash will never disappear entirely." So, in the end, it's a deathwatch item that doesn't predict death.

Deathlists

Some stories aren't content to proclaim one medium or technology or product dead; they go after a whole list. You'll find some overlap with other segments in these roundups. (There should be a term for articles or columns composed of lists. Larticles? Lazycles?)

You're Out: 20 Things That Became Obsolete This Decade

I know, I know, quoting *Huffington Post* is almost as silly as quoting *Wired* (although *Wired* has better writing), but hey… This one's by Bianca Booker on December 22, 2010. It's a photo essay celebrating the "new way of life" from iPods and iPads and the rest and calling out all those things that became obsolete. Now, obsolete, obsolescent and dead are three different things, but let's see how the list does.

For starters, although I could argue the details, I'll give them these: VCRs and VHS tapes; classifieds in newspapers; [print] encyclopedias; and *maybe* fax machines [although, as far as I know, most every multifunction printer with a keypad is in fact a fully functional fax machine, built-in modem and all]. And I don't know enough to argue about "Phone sex via 1-900 numbers." What of the other 15?

- Travel agents: *Bull*. If you're planning a complex vacation overseas, you want a travel agent. If you're booking a cruise, you probably should want a travel agent. Yes, most of us do it ourselves *most of the time*—but travel agents aren't obsolete.
- The separation between work life and personal life: If that's true, it's a sad commentary, and I'm pretty sure a few million folks have

no intention of (essentially) being on call 24 hours a day.

- Forgetting: Bwahahah… Now, what was I going to say here? Despite *HuffPo*'s apparent attitude, there is life beyond the internet.
- Bookstores: Fortunately, that's not true. Independent bookstores may be coming back, and some great ones never left and don't plan to.
- Watches: Oh good grief, the article quotes the Beloit List on this one…"Few incoming freshmen…have ever worn a wristwatch." Which, of course, means *they're dead* because nobody over 18 matters…if it was true, which it isn't. (My great-nieces, for example, mostly have wristwatches—analog ones, with dials—because it's easier than pulling the phone out of your pocket.)
- Maps: Not entirely. GPS and online maps are great, but paper maps still work for many things and AAA produces a lot of paper maps.

At this point, I get the gist: "If a digital or newer version is available, then the older or analog version *is obsolete*." Simple. Or simplistic.

- Dial-up internet: Sure, if broadband's available where you live.
- CDs: Not even close, despite the simple statement.
- Landline phones: Here it is again: Young'uns *mostly* don't have landlines, therefore they're dead, dead, dead. Even though they're still in roughly three-quarters of American homes.
- Film and film cameras: Not really. Yes, for most casual use; no, for some uses.
- Yellow pages and address books: Another "we think it *should* be obsolete, therefore it *is* obsolete" item: The truth by fiat.
- Catalogs: Apparently none of us get catalogs in our mail any more. L.L. Bean and Land's End will be surprised to hear that (as will TravelSmith and hundreds of others).
- Wires: I have to quote this marvelous example of *HuffPo* thinking at its best:

  Wireless internet, wireless updating, wireless downloads, wireless charging, wireless headphones: Although wires are still around (for now!), they're well on their way to being a thing of the past.

Riigghhtt…

- Hand-written letters: Not really, although perhaps close.
- Calling: Because teens text more than they call or talk face-to-face. In other words, whatever *a majority of teens* do is the only thing that happens.

I wonder when *Huffington Post* will be obsolete…

There were 1,489 comments. I didn't read more than the first few, most of which were trashing items on the list (except for one person in their early 20s telling everybody else to get over it…)

15 Classic Products On The Brink Of Death (PHOTOS)

HuffPo just loves deathlists, apparently—they're cheap journalism and they attract readers. Thus this January 4, 2013 photo essay, which I won't give as much detailed attention to. Here's the list, though: iPods, landline phones, newspapers, film cameras, video rental stores, Blackberries, CDs, classified ads, hand-written letters, bar soap (!), floppy disks, bottled water, stick-shift cars, encyclopedias and fax machines.

A little redundancy from the earlier list? Well, it still got me to *look at 15 different ads* while clicking through the pages—in addition to the surfeit of ads elsewhere on the page. And that, I'm pretty certain, is the whole point: *HuffPo* has to find some "content" to wrap around its endless array of ads.

Bar soap?

7 Major Ways We're Digitizing Our World, And 3 Reasons We Still Want Hardcopies

This one—on October 11, 2010 at *treehugger* by Jayme Heimbuch—is odd because it veers between universalisms and reality. And because the subtitle is even more definite: "We've Digitized" rather than "We're Digitizing."

The seven? Books to e-books; DVDs to streaming; CDs to MP3s; road maps to GPS; photos to Flickr (psst: almost all those still images on Flickr are photos, albeit taken with digital cameras and other digital devices); snail mail to e-mail; magazines, newspapers & journals to online article databases. The commentaries range from not too terrible, to a bit overstated on the digital side (road maps), to *way* overstated (the last one: in fact, newspapers aren't dying *that* quickly).

The point of the article is actually the second part—the three problematic aspects. And that part, although it also has problems, is interesting.

12 Technologies On The Verge of Extinction

This dozen comes from Gord Goble at *Gizmodo* on January 12, 2011, but it's really from *MaximumPC*. These are "techs that they expect to die out by 2020—or at least come close." And they claim to be controversial. The first paragraph is charming:

> You will likely disagree with some of our assessments. But you're wrong and we're right. At least we think we're right. And if we're one day proven wrong, hopefully you'll have forgotten our bold stance and bravado.

The dozen? They're split into two groups—the clearly doomed and "the survivors." The doomed:

- Pre-recorded physical media—*all* pre-recorded physical media. Why? The argument is that "there's little doubt the Web will soon be the hub for all our personal electronic entertainment. How could it not?" Argument through assertion, my very favorite.
- 3D TVs that require glasses. I'd be inclined to agree (I think 3D continues to be a dumb idea for movies, but that's me)—but they're really pushing "autostereoscopic TVs" and, of course, holographic TV.
- eBook readers—because, *convergence*.
- Consumer-level hard drives—because, you know, flash drives keep getting cheaper (unlike hard…oops) and "mobile hipsters" put everything in The Cloud.
- Keys. Really. By 2020, *all of us* will install keyless residential entry systems. Truly. Don't *you* switch out all of your house's doors at least once every decade?
- Handheld gaming consoles. Because, you know, *inevitable convergence of everything into one device*.

If I was a gambling man, I'd bet serious money that prerecorded discs (Blu-ray, DVD, CD) will still be sold in the millions in 2020 and even more on the dead-certainty that *millions of people will still be using them*. Same for hard drives and keys. The others? Also probably not doomed.

More curious in some ways are "the survivors":

- Digital music/media players—because, apparently, *inevitable digital convergence* matters for ebooks and gaming but doesn't for music.
- Landline telephones, because of power outages.
- Internal combustion auto engines, followed by a long chunk of blather.
- The PC, keyboard and mouse: No comment. Anybody who believes *keyboards* are going away entirely in seven more years will believe almost anything.

So not only is this one silly, it's phony: It's really "six technologies we assert will be extinct, and six more where we don't think that's the case." At least *MaximumPC* is likely to be half right.

10 American Companies That Will Disappear in 2011

I wouldn't bother with this—corporate structure's not my thing—but it's an interesting example of the apparent need to create deathlists with scant evidence, no matter what the topic. This one, by Douglas McIntyre on January 18, 2011 at *DailyFinance*, is based on another website, 24/7 Wall St., and makes short-term assertions. To wit, these companies should have disappeared by the end of 2011: Saab USA, Office Depot, Dean Foods, Frontier Airlines, Sara Lee, Borders, Gateway, DollarThrifty (car rentals), Answers Corp. and E*Trade.

Gateway disappeared as a company long before 2011, although it lives on as a brand for Acer. Office Depot…well, you know, I'd *swear* that chain is still around in 2013. So I checked each of the ten, looking for corporate reports. Office Depot is a large going concern (which may be merging with OfficeMax to create…Office Depot). Ditto Dean Foods (Silk, Land O'Lakes, Horizon Organic milk, others), Answers.com and E*Trade. Frontier's status is unchanged since 2011, as is Gateway's (as far as I can tell)—neither was an independent company in 2010, both appear to exist as brands in 2013. I'll give them three: Saab USA (except as a parts distributor), Sara Lee (which split into two, neither child called Sara Lee) and Borders. But then, three out of ten ain't bad…as a baseball batting average.

The Ten Brands That Will Disappear in 2010

The 3-of-ten track record for 2011 makes it almost irresistible to go to the source a bit earlier—as in this December 2, 2009 story at *24/7 Wall St*. And here the claim is that the *brands* will disappear, not just the companies—and that they'd do so in 2010. Which brands? Newsweek, Motorola, Palm, Borders, Blockbuster, Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, Ambac, Eastman Kodak, Sun Microsystems, E*Trade.

Borders disappeared, but not until 2011. The same goes for the Palm brand (Palm was acquired by HP in 2010, but the Palm brand didn't shut down until August 2011). There's still a Blockbuster store half a mile from my house and it still uses that name (I know it's owned by Dish, but this is about *brands*), although—even as I write this—that store is closing. In fact, the *only* correct prediction here is Sun Microsystems. That's a really awful track record.

7 things you don't need anymore

A slightly different slant, in this March 14, 2012 piece by Liz Weston at *MSN Money*: tech gear that "has outlived its usefulness." Why? Because "better,

more convenient, less expensive technologies may exist" for those not "clinging to the old." Such as?

- Television. Really? Yep—despite 2.86 TVs per household, "most of us" have learned that you're better off watching shows online and on smartphones. Because HDTV looks *ever* so much better on a 4" screen or a 10" tablet than on some crummy 54" TV set.
- Landline. This seems to be mostly about a Pew survey as to what's considered necessary. For that matter, the article even cites why landlines still make sense—911 from a cellphone may not work properly.
- DVD player: Blah blah streaming blah blah Netflix Amazon Apple blah blah Roku added "to your TV set"—which Weston just told us to get rid of.
- Physical music collection and dedicated player: So MP3 players are dead, dead, dead, as iPods have disappeared in favor of smartphones. Apple must be sorry that iPods disappeared, but that's the way it is. Just ask Liz Weston!
- Cable or satellite TV: More than two million households dropped cable in 2010, therefore… This is another "you can get most TV shows online" (and of course *they'll stay there* even if a majority of viewers stop watching ad-supported TV) bit.
- Desktop computer: "Kiss your tower goodbye, because laptops, tablets and smartphones are making it obsolete." This is based on the "because most people don't really use a computer's capabilities, therefore *nobody should own one*" theory.
- Email: Bwahahahah…. One of the preferred replacements? Paper mail.

Thirty-five comments. First on the "best" list:

> These may be 7 things YOU don't need anymore, but that's probably because you're over-privileged and wealthier than 99.9% of your readers. Shame on you, giving this kind of advice. You really don't relate.

Others are more specific; few agree. I guess some of us really do appreciate that, say, Downton Abbey or Bones or *The Music Man* in HDTV on a 54" set (or a 32" set) is maybe, just maybe, a richer experience than watching it on a smartphone.

Top 10 Things Today's Kids Will Never Experience

It's not clear when this *Time* feature appeared—probably in August 2010. The link goes to a page with an introduction referring to Beloit College's annual successful attempt to get publicity by spouting nonsense, then offers ten links for discussion of things *today*'s kids will never experience—meaning *they're already dead.*

The list: Camera film, landline phones, real books, being lost, music videos on MTV, Walkmans, "the glory days of Nick at Nite," tan M&Ms, Czechoslovakia, "Arnold Schwarzenegger, the Terminator."

Really? With landline phones still in more than three-quarters of American households, *kids these days* will never experience them? And, once again, Harry Potter apparently sold exclusively to adults who hid them from their childen, since *kids these days* will never experience real books (despite YA literature doing enormously well). (I looked at the links for those two. Despite a *majority* of "Millennials" still having landline phones, *Time*'s willing to proclaim that *none of today's kids* have ever seen one—and the "real book" piece mostly seems to boil down to "door-to-door encyclopedia sales have died, therefore books are dead.")

I'm delighted to hear that nobody gets lost any more. I'm sure that comforts the families of those who've died because of trusting bad computer-based directions and the woman who drove overnight to reach an airport 90 miles away. And it tells me that Apple's map application is perfect, along with Google and the others.

Our favorite "forgotten tech"—from BeOS to Zip Drives

This roundup isn't suggesting that things *never* become obsolete; far from it. Consider this August 23, 2012 article "by Ars staff" at *ars technica*. It follows a July 1, 2012 piece, "Tech remorse: worst gadgets we ever bought." That's a long, interesting and sad set of stories. This one consists of things the staff loved: "the best products that are sliding slowly into the memory hole." If not dead, then certainly obsolescent… What's on the list?

- The Iomega Zip Drive—remember the $20 cartridges that held a whopping 100MB each? (Yes, I wound up with two cartridges of stranded data… I may still have a drive somewhere, but no parallel port to plug it into.)
- Magneto-optical drives, the default removable storage medium for the NeXT: always slow, always expensive, never mainstream.
- The Vadem Clio C-1050, a really neat convertible computer (tablet or small notebook) from 1998—but it was built for Windows CE.
- Apple's PowerBook 1400, vintage 2000.

- The NES-101, a 1993 sleek top-loading redesign of the Nintendo Entertainment System that worked much better than the original, but was discontinued after a few months.
- The TI-83 graphing calculator.
- The Flip camcorder, which seemed to be doing nicely when Cisco killed it off.
- MiniDisc players (and recorders), e.g. the Sony Net MD Walkman.
- Nokia N800 Internet Tablet, a pre-iPhone attempt at a handheld internet device—with a "truly gorgeous 4.2" 800x480 display."
- Software, including some group of games, the BeOS platform and WASTE (an open-source peer-to-peer file-sharing client).

An interesting list and set of commentaries; in most every case, I'd agree that these are essentially dead. I believe the Zip and magneto-optical drives were the only overhyped cases, but at least the Zip had a pretty good run.

ReadWriteWeb DeathWatch Update: The Unlucky 13

It appears that *ReadWriteWeb*—or at least Cormac Foster, who wrote this on September 4, 2012—is *dedicated* to deathwatches. The introductory paragraph:

> If there's one thing the DeathWatch knows, it's that all things must come to an end. So we're pausing to review the fortunes of our first 13 unlucky inductees. The fates of some of them may surprise you.

I assume "come to an end" means precisely that—disappear, not become less than dominant. So who are the "unlucky 13"? There's Zynga (about which I know nothing except that it's still operating). Motorola Mobility, and here the "dominant or die" theme is pretty clear. Best Buy. Electronic Arts. Netflix—*Netflix?* Why Netflix? Because there are competitors, apparently. T-Mobile USA. Groupon. Sony. (Sure, Sony's going to die. Uh-huh.) Barnes & Noble. 38 Studios (whoever that is or was). Nokia. HP—*really?* Research in Motion.

As far as I can tell, this whole list is just a bunch of Cormac Foster snark: "I don't like these companies, so they're *goners*." And now that I look at the first sentence in the quoted paragraph again, I'm forced to ask: *Is* there one thing DeathWatch knows?

Turns out there are *lots* of Deathwatch items, including "Cheating Deatchwatch" items. Who's on death row since September 2012? Microsoft. AMD. Feature phones. Real estate multiple listing services. Flash. One Laptop Per Child (hey, even a broken clock is right twice a day). Point-and-shoot cameras ("they're doomed" because of smartphones), in-house datacenters…oh, and *of course* Blu-ray, since "Everyone knows optical storage discs are on their way out…" QR codes. And more.

The End of the Web, Search, and Computer as We Know It

It's in *Wired*, so it's automatically taking a cheap shot to comment on it—but it's from a Yale professor, so it *must be important*. In this case, the professor is David Gelernter, and he's touting "the lifestream" as the replacement for all this stuff, just as he predicted 16 years ago.

After attempting to read Gelernter's rhapsodizing, I think I'll defer my comment to the most recent first-level comment as I write this:

> Dude, should you really write stories to be published when you are that stoned?

To which another commenter replies:

> Didn't you read his bio? You're mocking a brilliant visionary rock star painter. We should just be grateful he's sharing his brilliant rock star visions with us.

Reference

Let's sneak a library item into this round-up…reference service. There were some 308.9 million reference transactions in U.S. public libraries in FY2010, which I suppose could be considered "dead" for certain values of dead. It's certainly a drop from just under 310 million reference transactions in FY2009—although it's only an 0.27% drop. Going back a couple more years…well, it was 301 million in FY2008 and 292 million FY2007, so I guess "dead" really means "not growing."

That's apparently good enough for Eli Neiburger, however…

Is reference service dead?

This April 26, 2011 post by Matthew Ciszek at *A Blog on LIST* links to an item by Michael Kelley at *Library Journal* citing Neiburger's "succinct message" at a Connecticut Library Association symposium: "Reference is dead and libraries need more geeks." He explicitly said Ann Arbor District Library was cutting reference staff to add servers and geeks and repeated "Reference is dead." (Neiburger writes off travel agents as well.) Ciszek also cites Jeff Trzeciak's notorious anti-librarian moves at McMaster University and quotes Neiburger's actual reasoning—that although professional librarians *can* add value to reference work, patrons really don't care. Ciszek:

> The problem with this kind of reasoning is that it becomes a "chicken-and-egg" argument about the

future of our profession. Are patrons abandoning reference services because they are finding what they need elsewhere? Or are we as librarians not responding to the true needs of the patrons and transforming reference services and proving their value and worth to patrons?

I am all for finding new ways of thinking about the services, collections, programming, and support that we provide to our patrons. The ever-changing world in which we find ourselves demands this. But instead of declaring reference services dead and a thing to be put in the history books, I think we need to reexamine reference service and transform it into something that has real value for our patrons. What this "new reference paradigm" looks like or how it works is up to us as librarians. Let's not give it over to the geeks and the techies. Good reference service is not technical support.

reference is dead! long live reference! a (very) personal rant

Lynda Kellam posted this on April 28, 2011 at *librarianship* =, also responding to the *LJ* article. Kellam's an academic librarian, and U.S. academic libraries had around 31.7 million reference transactions in FY2010, if I'm reading the data correctly.

Kellam doesn't denounce the "reference is dead" message; she uses it to explore what reference *is* or what it can be. And it may be important to say again that she's an academic librarian when you read this paragraph:

> An underlying assumption of The "Reference is Dead" view is that reference librarians are sitting patiently at a desk waiting for people to come and ask random questions about the seven dwarfs or ten reindeer or whatever other useless figure was mentioned in the movie Desk Set. Or even, what is the population of Mexico? I mean, really. I even google the population of Mexico instead of going to the library's website. That is not reference. Maybe it was ten years ago, but it isn't anymore.

I'd suggest that information desks still play useful roles in many public libraries, albeit probably different roles than a decade ago. She continues, defining the kind of reference work she believes is still relevant in academic libraries—and I'll refer you to the original for that discussion. But she has more to say:

> Second, whether or not Neiburger intends it, these blanket proclamations are sometimes used to make statements about necessary changes at all types of libraries. I do not pretend to understand what goes on in a public library and I do not know what kinds of questions patrons are asking in a public library. My library, however, is not a public library. Our library is used heavily by many different types of patrons (including community members who dislike the public library for whatever reason). In an era of budget cuts, I find it troubling that a librarian would proclaim the end of reference and not even be bothered to qualify that statement in a meaningful manner. Thank you, Eli Neiburger, for giving potential fuel to a General Assembly bent on gutting education. If they decide to go after our academic libraries specifically, I'll know where to place the blame.

And here we have a primary reason why flat generalizations like Neiburger's drive me nuts: Because they're weapons for anti-library politicians.

There's more, in what's quite a good discussion (hardly a rant!), but most of it's beyond the lightweight purview of this roundup.

Not Quite Dead Yet

I love pieces where something already pronounced dead is found to be not quite so dead as was assumed.

Hold the Typewriter Obituaries!

That's the title for a brief April 26, 2011 piece by Uri Friedman at *The Atlantic Wire*. It follows a story the previous day, "The World's Last Typewriter Factory Is Closed," noting the closure of a typewriter factory in India. Turns out the story wasn't quite right—or perhaps was missing a qualifier. Swintec has three typewriter factories still manufacturing for them—including transparent typewriters destined for prisons (clear to prevent contraband).

Swintec's still in that business. For that matter, Brother still produces typewriters. Yes, most of the traditional brands have disappeared and it's a pretty small market, but typewriters aren't quite dead yet. Oh: The missing qualifier? "manual." I don't find any indication that anybody still builds manual typewriters—all of the Brother and Swintec new models I could find are electronic.

Dead media walking? "Obsolete" communications systems live on

That's Matthew Lasar on July 12, 2011 at *ars technica*, in a story that needs to be repeated once in a while. He links to a bunch of deathwatch items—none of them ones I've included here—and adds:

> But technologies don't always cooperate with their epitaphs. Some folks don't get the memo and just keep using obsolete gear. Some tech ends up serving niche functions. Or devices are put to purposes beyond their original design. Consider, for instance, the telegram.

That's right—telegrams are still around (in some countries). So are teleprinters and telex, licensed

ham radio, AM and short wave radio, dial-up internet (about 5.5 million American households when he wrote this article), landline telephones and more. (Some of them in *very* narrow niches—e.g. telex—but some still vitally important, e.g., ham radio operators in emergencies.) I like Lasar's conclusion:

> What are we to make of these supposedly deceased technologies and their continued use? Clichés beckon: The reports of their death were greatly exaggerated. Old telecom technologies don't die—they just fade away.
>
> But perhaps when tech writers say "die," what they really mean is that the format in question will no longer enjoy its current dominant status. "Death," then, means falling off the top of the heap.
>
> Number One or Dead. That seems like an awfully stressful way to think about things. [Emphasis added.]

I think that's typically the case: If you're not dominant, you're dead. Try saying that in the automobile marketplace, and you'll get a whole *bunch* of Honda owners (and others) laughing at you.

Rebirths?

Sometimes things supposed dead are welcomed back to a new life via technology, and the results can be amusing in their own right.

A renaissance rooted in technology: the literary magazine returns

That's the title, Ben Johncock's the byline, and it appeared on November 10, 2010 on *The Guardian*'s Books blog. The subtitle interested me: I wasn't fully aware that literary magazines had disappeared. The photo is also interesting, as it shows a copy of the *London Review of Books* atop a bunch of books and journals with the caption "Old news… the London Review of Books is no longer top of young people's reading lists as other literary magazines embrace technology." Wow: A lot going on here. Being an old American, I didn't realize that the *London Review of Books* ever *was* "on top of young people's reading lists" or that it had disappeared.

A little checking. *Poets & Writers* shows 403 literary magazines (filtering for Print as a format) in its marketplace database (out of 860 including online magazines). Wikipedia's list of currently-published literary magazines *that have been around for at least 10 years* and continue to publish is quite long; I counted 48 print (and three online-only) going through the A's and B's, so I'd assume there are several hundred overall. The *London Review of Books* is still around, although it's not all that old (founded in 1979). It may have been The Reading of Choice for Young People in the UK at one point; I wouldn't know.

In other words, literary magazines never disappeared (the list of defunct ones in Wikipedia is relatively brief compared to the active list)—and maybe you'll get the tenor of this peculiar article from the first two paragraphs:

> When was the last time you looked out of the window when sitting on a bus? With the internet now in the palm of our hands, it's so much a part of our daily lives that it permeates our every spare second, taking up the time and energy that we once used to read books.
>
> If the novel is struggling in this new environment, what of literary magazines? Long extinct? The opposite: literary magazines are getting popular again.

Spot the universalisms in that first paragraph: "You" can't possibly look out a bus window; the internet permeates "*our* every spare second" and leaves no time to read books. And, of course, the novel is struggling.

This post seems as much an attack on the *London Review of Books* as anything, although it's mostly about the extent to which the internet makes widespread distribution of stuff cheap. And, somehow, the problems of novels and cheapness of internet distribution really mean that the *short story* is back.

That's welcome, if true—but the post leaves out a little question that would interest those who write short stories. To wit: Are they finally earning money?

What annoys me here is that a potentially interesting story is buried in false universalism and a fair amount of nonsense—but then, I'm not really a literary reader.

That's the Lot

I've left out some things I'd originally tagged—e.g., I decided not to include Farhad Manjoo on *anything*—but it's enough. I don't anticipate doing this again for another year, by which time I hope there will be a lot fewer items I find reason to tag.

Words
The Death of Books (or Not)

This deathwatch may be dying—and that's a good thing. Here's a roundup of items that seemed to fit into the "death of print books" or "death of

books"—but some of these refute that purported death. As usual, the order is mostly chronological, beginning in May 2011. I find that I mostly stopped tagging these things in mid-2012; maybe 2012 was the start of the Decade of Both?

'The Book Is Dead'? Let That Myth Rest in Peace

So says Peter Osnos on May 4, 2011 in *The Atlantic*—and Osnos is a book editor/publisher after 18 years as a journalist.

Osnos notes the rapid rise of ebook sales in early 2011 and that most publishers finally adopted ebook strategies. He then quotes Robert Darnton as to why books are *not* dying. But there's this—and unfortunately, that first sentence rings all too true:

> Not surprisingly, Darnton's optimistic judgment is criticized by those who contend that book reading is in decline. My view is that books are being read, but the means of delivery are changing.

For some, it seems to be an article of faith that people don't *read* any more, that books—on whatever platform—are dying. What Osnos sees is a more diverse set of publishers and self-publishers using various platforms. He notes a local story (he's in Greenwich, CT) about a forum at the local library (a well-supported and *very* active library) summed up by the moderator as "Books are holding up."

Osnos notes the problems with Borders and the impact of Amazon. He's not saying all is rosy, and he's not even saying print books will necessarily dominate. He is saying this:

> One outcome is certain—there will be books and they will be read, one way or another.

I can live with that.

Are Books An Endangered Species?

This one—by Raquel Laneri on May 20, 2011 at *Forbes*—is a little different. Although the byline reads "Raquel Laneri" it's apparently by Michael Levin, who argues that books are indeed going away—and that it's the fault of Big Publishing.

Levin is an "eight-time best-selling author, a former member of the Authors Guild Council and a business writer." He leaves no doubt that he believes in the "inevitable disappearance of books":

> It's not just that books are going to Kindles and iPads. It's that books are going away, and the publishers have no one but themselves to blame.

Why? Because the traditional Big Publisher model only works when there's no competition—when the biggies control distribution and marketing.

Here's where things get strange. He says—I believe correctly—that todays' world allows for many more ways of marketing and selling books, but he goes one step further:

> Yes, Kindle and iPad are game-changers. When you read books on a device, a few things change. You're moving into an environment where you typically don't pay for content—almost everything online is free. So publishers won't be able to charge $10 or $12 for an entire book when people only want a chapter's worth of information. So much for ebooks as a revenue stream for the publishing houses.

I'm guessing most Kindle and iPad owners *do* pay for content; maybe not $10 or $12, but those revenue reports for ebooks seem to be way north of $0. Oh, he also blames Amazon in a fairly bizarre way: Because you don't browse, so you don't wind up buying five books instead of the one you wanted. (Really! Apparently Levin believes 80% of book sales are "Ah, what the heck, let's pick up four more $25 hardbacks while we're here.")

He's mostly unhappy that Big Publishers acquire passively—that they don't go out and find what people *want* to buy. There's also the returnability factor (which I agree *needs* to change at some point).

It's an odd little piece, as that's basically it: Because *traditional publishers* behave stupidly, *books are doomed*. Just as, if GM and Chrysler had been allowed to go under *there would be no cars*. Right?

At that point, I wanted to know more about Michael Levin. His website is a tipoff: BusinessGhost.com. He's a ghostwriter. I'll suggest that ghostwriting is going to suffer badly in an era when big publishers with big advances become less significant. I'll also suggest that this may not be a bad thing.

BookStats Survey Finds Industry on Growth Curve

This one's a short preliminary news item by Jim Sturdivant on May 24, 2011 at *BookBusiness*—but it's worth noting. To wit, BookStats goes beyond the traditional AAP view of book sales (primarily big publishers) to include lots more—still not all, certainly, but more than 1,100 in the U.S.

The story here: Units (number of books) have been rising, albeit slowly—and so have dollars. More than half of the publishers surveyed showed growing sales, with small and medium-sized publishers doing best. This includes ebooks and print books. Notably, given claims that the next generation doesn't read, *all* categories of juvenile titles are growing.

When Hard Books Disappear

But Kevin Kelly knows better. As stated flatly in this June 10, 2011 piece at *The Technium*, Kelly *knows*: "Hard books are on their way to extinction."

Why? Well, after some blather about species, we get Brewster Kahle's big boxes full of books. Which leads to this:

> We are in a special moment that will not last beyond the end of this century: Paper books are plentiful. They are cheap and everywhere, from airports to drug stores to libraries to bookstores to the shelves of millions of homes. There has never been a better time to be a lover of paper books. But very rapidly the production of paper books will essentially cease, and the collections in homes will dwindle, and even local libraries will not be supported to house books—particularly popular titles. Rare books will collect in a few rare book libraries, and for the most part common paper books archives will become uncommon. It seems hard to believe now, but within a few generations, seeing a actual paper book will be as rare for most people as seeing an actual lion.

Why is that? Because Kevin Kelly says so, apparently. The rest of the post is about Kahle's project. I guess when you're a Guru like "KK" (the big red letters on the website—there's only one KK who counts!) you don't need facts—*it just is*. (I'm particularly impressed that he knows local libraries "will not be supported to house books—particularly popular titles." Why that is…well, you'd have to ask The Great KK.)

I include this as a high-profile example of continued Deathwatching for books—the flat statement that they're going away, with no room for discussion.

The End of Books

This piece, written by Octave Uzanne and published in *Scribner's Magazine Illustrated*, comes to us via The University of Adelaide.

I find it *quite* as convincing as anything by Kevin Kelly or Nicholas Negroponte—nay, all the more so, as it includes actual argumentation for the end of books.

Here's the start of a brilliant discussion of why printed book are inevitably doomed:

> "If by books you are to be understood as referring to our innumerable collections of paper, printed, sewed, and bound in a cover announcing the title of the work, I own to you frankly that I do not believe (and the progress of electricity and modern mechanism forbids me to believe) that Gutenberg's invention can do otherwise than sooner or later fall into desuetude as a means of current interpretation of our mental products.
>
> "Printing, which Rivarol so judiciously called the artillery of thought, and of which Luther said that it is the last and best gift by which God advances the things of the Gospel—printing, which has changed the destiny of Europe, and which, especially during the last two centuries, has governed opinion through the book, the pamphlet, and the newspaper—printing, which since 1436 has reigned despotically over the mind of man, is, in my opinion, threatened with death by the various devices for registering sound which have lately been invented, and which little by little will go on to perfection."

Uzanne argues that printed books will be replaced by phonography, with all books becoming audiobooks (although Uzanne doesn't use that term).

It's a long and really quite lovely piece. It's even illustrated by Albert Robida. It appeared in the July-December 1894 issue. I find it far more convincing than contemporary assertions, down to and including this final paragraph (it's a *long* piece), this time from John Pool rather than the author:

> "Either the books must go, or they must swallow us up. I calculate that, take the whole world over, from eighty to one hundred thousand books appear every year; at an average of a thousand copies, this makes more than a hundred millions of books, the majority of which contain only the wildest extravagances or the most chimerical follies, and propagate only prejudice and error. Our social condition forces us to hear many stupid things every day. A few more or less do not amount to very great suffering in the end; but what happiness not to be obliged to read them, and to be able at last to close our eyes upon the annihilation of printed things!"

Well said, well said.

Books Are Dead; Now What About Our Libraries?

That's the question raised by Noora Chahine on July 21, 2011 at *BC Magazine*. Chahine notes that we've all heard this before—print books dying, ebooks taking over—and continues:

> Despite those old purists stopping their ears and clinging to their dog-eared, yellowed tomes of yore, the end of the printed word is nearing. It may take a few decades, it may take a few years, but the inevitable will happen (barring some doomsday scenario of worldwide economic crash that cuts off all electricity).
>
> But one subject that hasn't been as widely talked about as the end of the brick-and-mortar bookstores will have wide implications across the country: the fate of our libraries.

Chahine "stopped using libraries years ago" after discovering ebooks. "I'm just as certain that quite a few people won't even bat an eyelash as libraries will be forced to close both state and nationwide, as they lose funding and fall under the dominance of the digitized world. But this isn't happy news for everyone." The next paragraph notes some of the *other* things public libraries do—but it doesn't matter. Ebooks mean that "libraries are finding it hard to stay rele-

vant" and big publishers are making it hard for libraries to circulate ebooks.

> Obviously, other solutions will need to be found if our libraries are going to survive the incoming wave. Otherwise, brace yourself as library closures hit the country, thousands of jobs are lost, and a large part of our cultural heritage disappears into obscurity.

Here's the thing. *I can't tell whether Chahine is serious or not*. If this is a serious piece, it's another "it just *is*" case, death by assertion. If it's not—well, it's pretty subtle as humor, maybe too subtle for me. Unfortunately, while some commenters disagree, one does so in a remarkably disagreeable way—believing that books will remain for The Elite, but that "most community libraries will shut down."

The printed book is doomed: here's why

This deathwatch comes to you as an August 4, 2011 editorial at *The Telegraph* by Shane Richmond, "head of technology." And Richmond has his reason: *Kids don't want printed books*. Simple as that. After all, a senior executive from a "big Silicon Valley company" said "I doubt that my daughter will ever buy a physical book." His daughter is nine. Richmond's daughter is two—and now he's not sure she'll ever buy one either.

Why? Because ebooks represented 14% of Penguin's sales in the first half of 2011. Oh, and because Shane Richmond wants *a search function* when he's reading, and "it's much easier to annotate and highlight" an ebook, and… Anyway, searching and annotating are "the killer functions," and since convenience always wins and *wipes out* the competition…

That's it. His daughter's generation will view printed books as "strange relics from their parents' generation." Or maybe they'll regard flat assertions that printed books are doomed as strange relics from that generation and before.

Company Scans Your Books for a Dollar—Ship 'Em In, Get a PDF via Email

You'd think this product description would be fairly straightforward. (The headline's wrong: you get 100 pages for a dollar, and even short books are generally more than 100 pages long, but never mind.)

It's the lead, by Aaron Saenz on August 18, 2011 at *SingularityHub*, that gets me:

> Someday my grandchildren will ask me what a printed book looks like. Hell, at the rate we're going, my children will probably ask the same question.

And, after a quick intro to the service:

> While the transition away from print media has been proceeding apace for a while now, a cheap book scanning service in the US means that thousands of personal libraries will be converted to ones and zeroes, pushing us ever closer to a world where all printed books (Gutenberg to Gladwell) belong in a museum.

Maybe I shouldn't expect anything different from a site with a name like "SingularityHub." I find it singularly odd that this fairly innocuous scanning service is a Symbol of the Death of Print, but that's how Saenz sees it:

> Whether 1DollarScan's success (or failure) comes from legal uses or not, however, their entry into the US market shows how far along into the death of print we are. Honestly, we might as well be shopping for a tombstone. Not only have major periodical publications announced they are making the switch, not only have digital sales continued to climb unchallenged, not only have libraries started to launch massive digital lending projects, but now we have companies looking to fill niche market applications. Wherever print media tries to hide, some new business is hunting it down to deal it a deathblow.

Incidentally, "major periodical publications…making the switch" comes down to *one newspaper publisher* saying, *jokingly*, that his company would *eventually* stop printing physical copies. As for "massive digital lending projects," all that Saenz sees in the OverDrive Kindle project is this:

> Now that public libraries, one of the last bastions of printed media, are thoroughly open to digital lending, the death of physical books seems more inevitable than ever.

His mind is made up. *Anything* that facilitates ebooks or digitization is just One More Tombstone. No disagreeable commenters; I'm guessing Luddites like me don't spend much time at SingularityHub.

Are books dead, and can authors survive?

Can you guess the answers set forth by Ewan Morrison in this "shortened version" of a speech at the Edinburgh international book festival, published August 22, 2011 at *The Guardian*?

Of course you can: It's one of those. Yes and no. Books are dead, authors can't survive.

As for the first, it's *really* straightforward, so much so that Morrison doesn't feel the need to present any actual, you know, *facts* (other than that ebooks are increasing in use):

> Will books, as we know them, come to an end?
>
> Yes, absolutely, within 25 years the digital revolution will bring about the end of paper books.

Now that *that*'s out of the way, Morrison can get on to the good stuff: the end of writing as a profession,

as ebooks will "mean that writers offer up their work for next to nothing or for free."

After that…Generation Y. The end of author advances. The long tail. Chris Anderson. Pirates. Nobody pays for content—*nobody*. Pirates again, and again. The race to the bottom. It's all doomed, doomed, doomed.

> In every digital industry the attempt to combat piracy has led to a massive reduction in cover price: the slippery slope towards free digital content.

If that means anything (I'm not sure it does), it must mean that digitally downloaded music now sells for *much* less than the old $12 for 12 songs on a CD, right? Oh, and *it's wrong* to self-publish: that will only hasten the (inevitable) end. Authors must stick with the big publishers who have (cough) treated them so well in the past, and who clearly *really care* about books, not just quick profits.

What's the future of books in a digital world?

This piece, by Emma Rathbone in Fall 2011 at *The University of Virginia Magazine*, starts out with a strikingly different statement:

> "The most important thing to point out," says Michael Suarez, director of U.Va.'s Rare Book School, "is that despite lots of writing to the contrary, the book is not dead." Suarez notes that in 2010 more titles than ever were published worldwide. Also, though the emergence of new media has changed the way we get information and tell stories, it's just another in a long line of expressive media. "The world of writing, or chirographic culture, didn't replace orality," he says. "Print didn't replace writing by hand, film didn't stop radio, television didn't stop the world of film."

Suarez discusses what's gained *and lost* in digital reproductions—the cases in which the container *does* influence the content. The prime example isn't a book, and it's a lovely example:

> At a lecture he recently gave at the Grolier Club in New York, Suarez showed a slide of a painting—Antoine-Jean Gros' Napoleon Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken at Jaffa. He then showed a slide of the same painting from a different source, and then another version. Each slide displayed a reproduction of the same work, and yet each had different light, a different tincture and a distinctly different feel. It was also hard to imagine, from the images, that the painting is a sweeping 16 feet high and 21½ feet wide. "You could never know that from looking at the digital surrogates," he says. "What are the ways that our substitution of these simulacra may distort our perception of the work of art itself?"

I've probably seen more than ten times as many major artworks in printed books as I have "in person"—and to some extent I haven't seen those paintings and sculptures at all. It's nearly impossible to understand the scope of a sculpture or a painting—either large or miniature—without seeing it in context. That *can* be true of literary works; it's not always, but it can be. (Is *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* the same book stripped of the John Tenniel illustrations?)

Suarez also wonders about more extreme decontextualizing—text mining and retrieving brief excerpts shorn of the entire work's context.

Suarez is certainly not anti-ebook or anti-digital. He's editor in chief of the Oxford Scholarly Editions Online, hardly a Luddite enterprise. Whether you agree with Suarez—who thinks "digital reading" promotes snippet-like reading—or not, this paragraph seems sensible:

> What's at stake, and what must be fought for, is our "ability to have sustained engagement with texts, to attain and retain the knowledge that comes from reading, and to grow slowly toward the wisdom that eventually comes from seeking knowledge." As Suarez says, "In doing so, our lives become a little more authentically good, a little more true and a little more beautiful."

The End of Books—This Time for Sure!

You gotta love a title like that, on a piece by D.G. Myers August 29, 2011 at *Commentary Magazine*. It's part of an ongoing discussion that Myers links to and that includes a remarkably irritable and fact-free rant by Bill Quick, whose argument for the end of books is an assertion, not an argument, and who trashes Myers in a manner unworthy of a supposed hotshot author.

Quick makes much of being the author of 28 novels published by Big Publishing—sometimes under a female pseudonym. I've probably read at least one of his stories but have no idea who he is. Well, he is the *Daily Pundit*, for what that's worth. (He's both a libertarian conservative and a believer in the singularity.) As for his argumentation, I like Myers' summary:

> The only reason to hand out these links is that Quick fires off assertions as if, unlike him, no one had ever, you know, actually made an argument to back them up. Or—here's a radical notion—pondered his assertions and actually disagreed with them.

Quick's typical response to disagreement is along the lines of "I know more than you do and I've been doing it longer, so up yours."

Where this gets interesting: Myers does *not* equate the future of books with the future of Big Publishing. He calls that conflation "a vulgar error."

> Electronic media, including self-publishing for the Kindle and iPad, have begun to liberate writers from the closed shops of the big publishing houses. Writers have begun to connect directly with readers, without the intermediacy of editors or even booksellers. That's what has everybody excited. Whether electronic media are the best objects for the storing and retrieval of literary texts—well, that's a different question altogether. Perhaps writers may even find a way to take control of the best possible object for literature, whatever it might turn out to be.

I dunno. Read the relatively short piece; follow some of the links. I know whose writing and thinking I prefer (I'm a fan of science fiction, though less so of series novels), and I know that Myers' stance—not that printed books will dominate, but that they will continue as a healthy piece of the literary market—strikes me as far more likely.

The End Of Books: Ikea Is Changing Shelves To Reflect Changing Demand

When you're John Biggs at *TechCrunch*, you can make damn near anything into a deathwatch—as in this September 9, 2011 item.

The *actual* story? IKEA's offering a new, deeper version of the "BILLY" bookcase for people who want to use them for curios.

When I look at IKEA in February 2013, it offers the BILLY—and calls it a *bookcase*. It's 11" deep, which—when I compare it to the best bookcases we have at home—is the same depth. A great depth for books, by the way.

It was just a toss-off line in an *Economist* piece heralding, you got it, changes in the book business. But Biggs sees it as much more. He starts "If you needed any more proof that the age of dead-tree books is over take a look at these alarming style changes at Ikea…" and says "Ikea is noticing that customers no longer buy them for books" (which is *nowhere* said in the *Economist* piece, and appears to be pure speculation). He continues, "all signs are pointing to the end of the physical book." And, given its own separate paragraph:

> As much as it pains me to say this and as horrible as it sounds, the book is leaving us.

He repeats this a couple more times with different emphases. He says "Ikea is against your product." Which is why it features a big white thing that's a *great* depth for books and, 15 months after this "death of books" story, calls it…a bookcase.

The death of books has been greatly exaggerated

So says Lloyd Shepherd, writing on August 30, 2011 at *The Guardian*, with this sentence as a tease:

> Radical change is certainly producing some alarming symptoms—but much of the doomsayers' evidence is anecdotal, and it's possible to read a much happier story.

Shepherd notes his own experience, with his first novel scheduled for major-publisher publication in early 2012.

> So imagine my surprise—nay, dismay—to discover that publishing's streets were not paved with gold, but stalked by the anxious, the gloomy, the suicidal. "Publishing's dead!" shouted men in sackcloth on Bloomsbury street corners. I had arrived at the party, but the coats were being handed out, the drink had dried up and the hostess had collapsed.

Looking beyond such doomcrying as was raised in the *Guardian* debate (already covered), he notes actual book sales figures for the UK, which are astonishingly good (up 42% in numbers sold from 2001 to 2011, up 36% in revenue).

Ah, but those figures don't include ebooks—and in 2011 there was much uncertainty about the extent to which growing ebook sales would mean shrinking book sales. And, of course, pressure to lower prices. But—remembering that Shepherd's talking about gloom & doom among big publishers—there's also this:

> There is a deeper, much more existential concern: that, basically, all readers are ultimately freeloaders and want to get books for free, and that the transition to digital devices will see an explosion in piracy and a collapse in pricing. The evidence for this is … well, I'm not sure what the evidence is, to be frank. Newspapers, it is said, are being destroyed because of people's appetite for free news. And we all know what happened to music, don't we? Those cockamamie teenagers ruined everything by downloading the stuff illegally.

He points out what's *different* about books—and notes that illegal music downloading seems to be dropping since iTunes came along.

He sees data showing reasonably good health for book sales—and sees the same in the US. He notes anecdotes about falling book advances and repeats that the plural of anecdote is not data—and that authors, when surveyed, don't show any sudden collapse in incomes. (In 2000, most authors surveyed didn't make much money, with 75% earning less than £20,000; a more recent survey showed similar figures.) But of course, there are a lot more writers…and more titles.

He concludes that the data does *not* add up to an industry in its death throes, although one going through considerable change. He suggests not in-

venting data when you really only have anecdotes. He notes all the new possibilities. And concludes a fairly long piece with this:

> So yes, the party's still on. It's not quite the same party, the drink's a good deal cheaper and we've got crisps, not caviar. But there are more people invited, and some of them look pretty groovy. I'll not get my coat just yet.

You gotta love one of the comments: "Finally, the Guardian publishes a piece on the book business where the author has done some actual research."

Beyond words: the Kindle Fire and the book's future

This odd piece by Nicholas Carr, appearing on September 28, 2011 at *Rough Type*, reminds me why I no longer read that blog and have generally stopped tracking Carr. Carr begins by noting that new media originally begin by resembling older media—and that this doesn't last (which isn't always true).

He then asserts that the Kindle was a stalking horse and that Jeff Bezos "never really wanted to save the traditional book. He wanted to destroy it." The instrument of that destruction: the "multimedia, multitouch, multitasking, app-tastic Kindle Fire." Which, in Carr's fevered worldview, means the ebook will "begin to assume its true aesthetic…text embedded in a welter of functions and features, a symphony of intrusive beeps." He goes on, to be sure—but he sees The Big Picture:

> But the real importance of the Fire is what it presages: the ultimate form of the e-book. Historians may look back on September 28, 2011, as the day the book lost its bookishness.

Quite. Here it is, a mere 18 months later, and text-only ebooks have *disappeared*, universally replaced by multimedia apps, which are quite clearly *the future*. Or…not.

I own a Kindle Fire HD 8.9—a much more suitable device for the kind of multimedia all-distraction-all-the-time "ebook" Carr envisions. Let me count the times I've had stuff marketed to me *as ebooks* (not games) that fits his description. I can do it on one hand and have five fingers left over. Amazon touts *lots* of stuff for my Kindle…but pretty much all of the ebooks are text in digital form.

The Mythical Paperless World: Why Print Will Stick Around

That's by Kristina Bjoran on September 30, 2011 at *Six Revisions*. She begins with some familiar "print is dead" clichés (and notes that they've been going on for two decades, which is a little shy of the mark). She includes a few links then says:

> Whether the futurists and idealists believe it or not, there are enough extant circumstances to ensure print's place in this world for some time to come. There are too many anchors, limitations and exceptions that exist in the "print industry" to see it wither into dust.
>
> By the way, the phrase "print industry," the way it's used, is a bit of a poppycock misnomer. What lies behind this whole argument is something a bit deeper.
>
> It's the Paperless World that everyone is expecting. They have been for years. And it's gone the way of our jetpacks and Moon-based theme parks.

Why? First she takes pains to note that *print* is not synonymous with *newspapers* (and, for that matter, that newspapers still have their roles). Still, she believes most major newspapers will eventually go digital-only, but that doesn't mean the death of all print.

She doesn't say a *lot* about books, but proceeds to the more general use of paper communications and notes that it's a huge field, unlikely to disappear any time soon. She also notes that technology already makes it easy for all newspapers and books (and magazines) to be wholly online—and yet they're not.

She offers some of the "barriers" to the all-digital scenario: (some) people prefer to have paper in hand; print is "legacy"; paper sales are doing just fine; social architecture doesn't push us to a paperless future. Oh, and ereaders are still primarily for the privileged. She also notes the extent to which print is different from other (partially) superseded technologies—and its lasting nature. She concludes:

> Our world runs on paper. We have long-standing infrastructures that depend on it, from governmental to corporate. And while e-books and the Internet will probably change that eventually, it probably won't be in my lifetime. Or yours.

It may be useful to note that Bjoran is a science writer…who works at *Wired*, that great promulgator of the all-digital everything, where early staffers were encouraged never to use pen and paper. "20 years later, I assure you, plenty of pens are floating around. And even more paper."

You gotta love some commenters. The second comment: "My family has been newspaper free for ~5 years. The only time we purchase is when a picture of one of the kids is included. Phone books are also dead." In other words, *one family's choices* determine the universal future? That's not even the *plural* of anecdote. One other comment is similarly simplis-

tic—but others see more nuance, such as "Cory" who calls it "undeniable" that print isn't going to be the major (I assume he means primary) medium for content delivery in the future, and in fact isn't already…but "A star can shine bright without being the brightest." Cory's right, of course: for pure quantity of "content" broadcast TV beats the hell out of print books and has for many years, and I doubtless read a lot more text on the screen than on the page.

The End of the Twilight of Doom

That's Barbara Fister on August 2, 2012 in "Library Babel Fish" at *Inside Higher Ed*.

> Why do we love apocalyptic metaphors so much? Nobody reads. Libraries are doomed. Higher education must change radically or die; no, wait, it's already dead. R. David Lankes (author of *The Atlas of New Librarianship*) says it's time to close the crisis center when it comes to libraries, and I agree.

The Lankes piece is quite nice (I'm sometimes at odds with Lankes, but this time, at least…): he's basically saying that doomcrying about libraries is not only wrong, *it's damaging*—which is what I've been saying for quite some time, and why I did the public library (non-)closure studies. Lankes seems to be saying pretty clearly "I was wrong"—to the extent that he was spreading the "libraries need saving" theme.

> To be sure libraries need more funding, they need modernization, they need a shifted identity in the minds of our communities. To be sure there are some libraries that need to be saved in the most literal sense from closure, but the whole profession? By taking on the mantra of saving libraries, we are assuming that we weak. Worse, it plays into the whole idea that we are wounded or broken.

Since Lankes has many, many times the readership and clout that I do, I'm delighted to read this—go read his whole piece.

Back to Fister. She notes how easy it is to use deathwatches, to "fan fear," and how adept agencies such as NEA have been at, well, fanning fears. She notes how easy it is to fall into the demonstrably false assertion that "nobody reads anymore."

> Lankes argues that constantly emphasizing risk and decline of libraries can lead to a perception that libraries are too far gone to be saved, that the doom we invoke for dramatic effect has already happened and is irreversible. Walt Crawford has also studied the narrative of library closures in the United States, finding it an exaggerated obituary. (Sadly, this seems not to be true in the UK, where public libraries are being closed and turned into volunteer operations in rather alarming numbers.)

Thanks for the link, Barbara—and it still works, unlike the UK one.

> Why is it that we don't want to present a happier view of books and reading, of libraries, or of what higher education today actually does accomplish? In part, it's the old newsroom slogan–"if it bleeds, it leads." Bad news is more likely to get attention, and librarians are more prone than anyone to spread it–either as an emotional appeal to recruit support for libraries or to sway other librarians to a position ("if we don't do as I say, we are doooooooomed!")

Yep. And when Fister goes on to say there may be an element of elitism here, I think she's probably also right. Mostly, though, she's right to say we need "a counter-narrative to the apocalyptic rhetoric" both about libraries and about books. Doomcrying can be self-fulfilling; so can success stories.

Dead Again

That's the direct title for this Leah Price essay in the August 10, 2012 *New York Times Sunday Book Review*. On the web, it shows up as "The death of the book through the ages."

Price begins with a 1998 Robert Coover essay on "the end of books" and notes the "thousand eulogies" since then for books on paper. But then goes back further—to an 1835 novel proclaiming that newspapers were killing books.

> In hindsight, we can see how rarely one technology supersedes another. Television didn't kill radio any more than radio ended reading. Yet by 1927 a librarian could observe that "pessimistic defenders of the book . . . are wont to contrast the active process of reading with the lazy and passive contemplation of the screen or listening to wireless, and to prophesy the death of the book." By 1966, in a Life magazine profile, Marshall McLuhan lumped books with other antiques: "clotheslines, seams in stockings, books and jobs—all are obsolete."

McLuhan was, as usual, right in his own way: Books *are* as obsolete as jobs. Price notes that the message—the book's epitaph—is always the same; "all that changes is the whodunit." There's more, to be sure.

It's Alive!

And here's the companion piece, by Gillian Silverman in the same August 10, 2012 *New York Times Sunday Book Review*. It's a very different sort of essay, one I'm loathe to summarize or comment on. Here's the final paragraph, possibly a good place to finish this essay:

> Perhaps these days our iPhones and MP3 players and even our Nooks, rather than our printed books, are parts of ourselves, the lifelike objects without

which we feel lost and disoriented, and even, somehow, less alive. But the book was there first, blurring the boundaries between human and non-human, between our bodies and the outside world. We are not so much entering a brave new universe as continuing an established tradition. Sure you could say our media technologies, starting with the book, have tended to sequester us in cubicles, but they have also been, and continue to be, among the most cherished company we keep.

The Back

I was astonished to find that, as of January 11, 2013, I had 70 items tagged "back" in Diigo—some going back two years. That's in addition to items I pick up from print magazines. So it's time for an assortment of snarky little commentaries, some just for fun, some with small points to make. Some aren't even snarky—they're items I think you might find amusing or worthwhile and that I'm unlikely to include anywhere else. At least this roundup gets me through the end of 2011…

Bury My Watch with Me

I don't know why these ads get to me—generally full-page or two-page, always in magazines assumed to have somewhat upscale readership—but they do. You know the ones: For Patek Phillipe watches, which seem to start at about the price of a luxury sedan and go *way* up from there.

Ah, but you don't *own* the watch: "You merely take care of it for the next generation."

One of two thoughts I've had appears above. The other is the conversation this watch-owner has with his kid, who's about to graduate from high school: "Well, the market's soured and fact is, I spent your college fund on this great watch—but hey, I'm just taking care of it for you down the line."

That's mean-spirited. Clearly these watches are sold as works of art and with an implicit warranty (almost an explicit one!) that they last quite literally forever. I'm sure nobody ever overextended themselves or endangered their children's education in order to buy a massively expensive watch.

Affordable, Affordable, Affordable

Picking on *Stereophile* for its assumptions about reasonable pricing is cheap fun but, hey, it's fun—and when the cover of the August 2012 issue uses "Affordable" *three times* to head up notes on what's reviewed (Affordable Loudspeakers, Affordable Digital Excellence, Affordable Sonic Elegance) it's hard to resist.

That trio of Affordables wasn't why I retained the issue for snarkiness. I flagged two items by the same writer, Art Dudley, for different reasons. The first is the up-front op-ed, "As we see it," in which Dudley states firmly that *faith* is what separates true audiophiles from non-audiophiles: The *belief* that X is better than Y. I think that's charming, actually, especially since the nice thing about faith is that it's not subject to critical analysis.

The other? His regular column, and I think it also involves faith. He tells us about five "vintage loudspeakers" we need to hear—"because the best vintage gear offers an abundance of musically agreeable qualities that are missing from even the best contemporary gear." Consider that: He's saying that even quarter-million-dollar speakers and hundred-thousand-dollar turntables (yes, both of those exist) *aren't as good* as the old stuff. To understand his reasoning—or, rather, his faith—you'd need to read him for a while and get into his mindset. I'm mostly bemused. (Actually, I might be inclined to think "musically agreeable qualities" is synonymous with euphonic distortion—making everything *pretty* rather than reproducing what was recorded—but that's just me.)

But back to Affordable. Affordability is, of course, contextual: What's affordable for Larry Ellison—e.g., a Hawaiian island—might not be for Larry Elision, who just lost his job and is behind on his mortgage, and what was affordable for us when we both had good jobs may be less so during involuntary retirement when you can't get 3% interest on a CD. It's also true that affordable and reasonably-priced (also contextual) aren't necessarily the same thing: A $1 doohickey that breaks the first time you use it is probably affordable, but certainly not reasonably-priced.

What about the three instances from the *Stereophile* cover? The first applies to four loudspeakers; the second to a digital-analog converter (DAC); the third to an amplifier. Let's see what Affordable means in these cases—and whether you might assume it means Reasonable (reasonably-priced):

- The loudspeakers cost (respectively) $398 a pair, $760 a pair, $559 a pair and $400 a pair. I think the label applies in all four cases: Those are *very* reasonable prices for audiophile-quality loudspeakers and probably affordable for anyone who aims to be an audiophile.

- The DAC is $495. Is that affordable? Absolutely. Is it reasonable? Harder to say, but I wouldn't argue the point. (It may depend on what else is available.)
- The amplifier is $2,450, for which you get "about" 12 watts per channel. It is, of course, a tube amplifier. If you think tube amplifiers are inherently superior, then $2,450 may be in the affordable range. Otherwise, $2,450 for a 12-watt amplifier seems, well, extravagant.

I'll grant *Stereophile* that, at least by the magazine's standards, all three "affordables" make sense.

Calling bullshit

The next item is also from *Stereophile* (this time the September 2012 issue) and also involves Art Dudley, again in the op-ed position. This time, he's saying "it's time to call bullshit on some of this stuff"—specifically, cables that cost more than $10,000 and isolation cones (little things you put under equipment) that cost more than $1,000, but also absurdly expensive products in general. He was pushed to this by going to an audio-video show and seemingly getting the same price point for every piece of equipment he asked about: $20,000, whether for an amp, a preamp or a cable.

Dudley says that—based on his own reporting—the *average* price of a digital source component at one New York show was $12,670, and only that low because of one $350 item. The average turntable price: $18,196. Tonearms? $6,184. Cartridges? $7,544. The *average* loudspeaker price: $39,559 a pair (those $760/pair speakers are starting to sound pretty cheap!). Average preamp: $25,393. Oh, and average amplifier: $37,331. The overall average for all components: $20,982.

Later in that issue, Markus Sauer reports on the Munich High End Show, with 366 exhibitors and more than 14,000 visitors. He was "somewhat baffled" by seeing so many products that "seemed geared toward the 1%." Some items he thought were worth mentioning? $13,000 amps that go with $13,000 preamps; a "midrange" $8,000 turntable—and another $19,000 "middle of the range" 'table. Another $20,000 amplifier—ah, but also one that sells for $860 and includes not only an amplifier but also a CD player. He didn't find too many systems that sounded good enough to warrant their prices; one that he did added up to $90,000 including cables. (That's just for CD player, preamp, amp, speakers and cables, as far as I can tell.) I'm not sure how many people below the 1% can reasonably throw $90,000 into a sound system. I *am* sure that some high-end folks would consider that a "mid-priced" or even "budget" system.

In that same issue, the "LPs are always better" guru of the magazine dropped in a side comment that makes it clear he regards President Obama as a socialist. Why this is relevant to reviewing a $15,000 cartridge (with a diamond embedded in its body apparently just for show, and individual samples that don't meet specifications) is beyond me, but it helps to draw my mental picture of Michael Fremer. Not favorably, to be sure.

Least and Most

Since I mention four affordable speakers above (all of which I agree are affordable), let's skip ahead to the January 2013 *Stereophile* and the uppermost line on the cover: "The least expensive and most expensive speakers ever reviewed" (with an "Inside: Extreme Loudspeakers" ribbon next to it). That's all caps on the cover, but not particularly large type—I'm guessing it was a late addition to the cover. "…in *Stereophile*" belongs at the end of that first line, of course.

The first review is not a typical review article—it's Stephen Mejias' "The Entry Level" column (Mejias has an odd view of entry level and he's very much a vinyl person, but that's irrelevant to this case). He offers a rave review of Dayton Audio's B652 speakers, connected to his $2,400 system (sourced with a turntable, *of course*). The speakers cost $39.80. *A pair.* That decimal place is properly placed: The speakers cost less than forty bucks. He finds the sound musical, enjoyable, even moving. It's a very positive review. The Daytons aren't as good as his $299/pair PSB Alpha B1s, but they're also one-seventh the price. The review was enthusiastic enough that John Atkinson followed up with a set of measurements—and while the speakers have no real bass (below 100Hz they drop off fairly quickly) and the cabinets have resonance problems, he finds that they performed much better than he was expecting, especially for the price.

At the other extreme, Michael Fremer, who almost always finds extremely expensive equipment to be more than worth the price, reviews Wilson Audio Specialties' Alexandria XLF, which run $200,000 a pair—in other words, 5,000 times as expensive as the Daytons. Fremer casually adds in the $10,000 you'd spend for speaker cables (hey, if you're spending 200 big ones on the speakers, 10 more for cables is chicken feed) and, of course, Fremer's first take on whether it's worthwhile is clear:

> Think no one spends that kind of money on a music system? Don't kid yourself. Many people can afford it, and many spend it—*though not as many as should*. [Emphasis added.]

He's talking about a full system—which would certainly be well over a quarter-million.

It's a long, *long* review. *Of course* listening to music with these speakers was a "transformative experience"—Fremer's life is transformed frequently. *Of course* he concludes that they're worth the money. And, for some people, he may be right.

There are your extremes: 5,000 to 1. And when it comes to loudspeakers, I'm not willing to say the situation is absurd.

How This $2,000 HDMI Cable Will Change Your Life

This may be the right place to mention this January 10, 2011 item by Laura Northrup at *The Consumerist*. It's about the AudioQuest Coffee cable—a 12-meter HDMI cable that sells for $2,000. Or, when I checked it at Amazon on January 12, 2013, $2,199.75. As Northrup says:

> Oh, sure, it's not for everyone, but online customer reviews report life-changing and scientifically impossible experiences that you just can't get with your ordinary $5 HDMI cable.

She quotes a (now-defunct) user review at Best Buy that's clearly a put-on—and two more in the same vein, ending with this:

> I must say that this thing is truly a work of art. We no longer bother to turn on the TV, instead opting to stare at this wonderment for hours on end. Now we don't have to risk cable burn in! The kids have given up playing video games, preferring instead to gaze at the beauty of this cable. If everybody had one of these, there would be peace on Earth forever! God bless AudioQuest!

In a way, what's amusing here are the comments at *The Consumerist*—many of which seem to take the "user reviews" as being serious and complain about the price of the cable. The Amazon product listing has 16 reviews: two negative ones saying, in essence, that a $6 cable will perform just as well (almost certainly true for shorter distances; you'd probably need to spend $10 or $15 if you really need a 39-foot/12-meter cable), the other 14 along the same lines as the three from Best Buy. (One of them even links to another Amazon listing—for a $5.49 two-meter HDMI cable.)

As for AudioQuest's blurb about their audio research and why an absurdly overpriced cable will somehow pass the audio that's encoded in the digital signal better than a good cheap cable would...I can only comment that if you believe that, you really should skip the 12meter cable and go right to the AudioQuest Diamond two-meter cable: Instead of the $183.33 per meter you pay for that cheap Coffee cable, this one costs $1,494.75, or $747.38 per meter. That's four times as much, so it must be *four times better!*

Audiophiles and the Need to Be Special

Eleven months later, here's MarkCC writing on December 30, 2011 at *Good Math, Bad Math*—and talking about audiophile claims of perceptions and better hearing (which are hard to prove or disprove), how important it is for them to feel special…and, eventually, about HDMI cables. He explains *why* digital signals—packetized—either work perfectly or don't work at all and why that means high-end HDMI cables should not *possibly* work better than properly engineered $12 cables. He quotes some (serious) reviews, Lots of comments—several disagreeing with him, of course.

When the measurements disagree…

Sometimes I think *The Abso!ute Sound* had the right tactic: Deal with problems in measurements by simply *never measuring anything*. That's one reason I dropped my subscription, to be sure,

The January 2013 *Home Theater* has a review of a $2,888 speaker system (that's for a 5.1-channel surround system). The review's enthusiastic…but the measurements are pretty awful. *So* bad that the editor found it necessary to run a lengthy comment at the end of the review. Both the reviewer and the editor concluded that it was possible that the "hypnotic allure" of the speakers' tweeters caused the reviewer to ignore serious problems with the rest of the sound. An unusual situation—not that a reviewer might get lost in one aspect of a device, but that the editor might directly attach some questions about it.

The Truth About Free Trials

That's the title of a Tom Spring article in the October 2012 *PC World* (I read it in print, but it's available online now) where Spring tried out 40 free-trial offers…and tried to leave each one before the credit card he had to use to register was charged. I'm including the story here not because I want to be snarky about it but because the situation deserves snarkiness—and it's a good story.

It's not always a *pretty* story. Three sites charged his credit card after he cancelled the trial; ten buried the cancellation instructions; seven had technical glitches during the cancellation process. There are a

whole lot more "moderate annoyances"—too many clicks to cancel, too long a process, failure to acknowledge cancellation—and minor annoyances, but those were the worst.

Then there are the good guys, such as Merriam-Webster (the cleanest of the 40). Netflix and Hulu Plus weren't at all bad; neither was Ancestry.com. (I can speak to the relative ease of canceling Hulu Plus.)

A good read. If you're planning to sign up for some free trials, take a look.

Sometimes You Just Wonder

Maybe I shouldn't bother to comment on the four-page review of the Lutron Sivoia Motorized Shade System in the October 2012 *Home Theater*. Apparently Darryl Wilkinson is blown away by shades that raise and lower themselves—he calls it the coolest damn thing and says "it's difficult to grasp the enchanted feeling and quasi-mystical pleasure that even the least gadget-savvy person can get from being in a room in which some hidden electronic sorcery conjures the shades to obediently open and close…on command."

Um. "Quasi-mystical pleasure."

Given the sheer magic mystical coolness of *ooh look! the shades just rolled up!* the price of $10,000 for a system handling 23 shades is perfectly reasonable. I wouldn't know: We have plantation shutters in our house (no, they weren't even close to being cheap; no, we didn't pay for them, except to add two—and *they weren't cheap*), and the Lutron system really only works with cellular shades. Supposedly, these shades save you money on heating and air conditioning because they provide added insulation. Maybe. Not sure how much they'd do for double-paned windows. Pretty sure plantation shutters do more (but I could be wrong).

Clearly, we're not the target audience. It's never been a bother to walk 20 feet to open or close shutters. If we had the kind of McMansion where distances to shutters or shades *were* an issue, $10,000 would be chump change.

Really?

Speaking of just wondering: Lincoln Spector's "Consumer Watch" in the December 2012 *PC World* is "Is There Enough 3D Content for 3D HDTVs?" I'm not going to excerpt his answer to that question, but I will take aim at one two-sentence paragraph:

> It's difficult to pin down exactly how much a 3D feature adds to the cost of a new HDTV because the number of variables involved is extremely large. But I would guess that the figure is probably in the neighborhood of $300 to $400.

That's some neighborhood. Especially given that, as I write this—only one month after that issue date—Amazon is selling an LG HDTV with 3D for $550 (including six pairs of glasses), a Vizio 47" 3D HDTV for $680 and a 32" version for $435, a Panasonic 50" plasma with active 3D for $771, an LG 42" plasma with active 3D for $599…need I go on? All of which leads me to believe that $300 to $400 is at least $100 to $300 too high.

…In Virtually Every Home

We were told a couple of years back that our next TV *would* be a 3D TV, because of course we'd all want them…and they'd be shoved down our throats even if we didn't. I thought that was ludicrous at the time; I still think so (and find it interesting that dedicated 3D cable channels are either disappearing or turning to part-time operation). But David Vaughn, reviewing a "2D-to-3D converter" in the December 2012 *Home Theater,* says this: "If all 3D content could look like *Avatar*, I have no doubt there would be a 3D-capable display in virtually every home." I have a whole bunch of doubt about that. (As to the "converter," it's "somewhat 3D" as you'd expect—oh, and you can't use it for games, as it adds lag to the picture.)

Budget?

I was struck by *PC World*'s January 2013 one-page "Editors' Choice" list of top ten "Budget Desktop PCs." The best buy? A $1,299 desktop computer. By my standards, a budget PC should be in the $500-$600 range—and a couple of the PCs *are* under $700. But one is also $1,689. For a *budget* PC. Whose budget, exactly?

An oddity along the way: The bottom of the page provides a URL for the in-depth version of this one-page table…but that URL redirects to a set of *five* budget PCs from April 2012. Online stuff is *hard*.

The same issue has *PC World*'s favorite set of "desktop replacement" notebook computers. The top unit? $5,700 dollars! (The "cheapest" units are $1,454 and $1,750.) That's not for a specialized gaming machine, that's to replace a desktop computer. Whatever.

Doing it Right

Since I've poked fun at the January 2013 *PC World* above, I should congratulate them for an astonishing editorial decision, given past practice in most PC magazines.

To wit: "100 Best Products of 2012" appears in January 2013—not somewhere in the middle of 2012. That's little short of astonishing.

A Huge Safety Hazard!

I can't make this stuff up. Here's "On Your Side" in the December 2012 *PC World* with a consumer complaint: Once they updated their new Motorola Droid Razr Maxx (somebody must have fun coming up with these model names), "The phone doesn't remain backlit while in my car cradle (a huge safety hazard)."

Really? Yes, I know, *using your cell phone* while driving is a huge safety hazard…oh, but that's not what you're talking about, is it? You want it to be nicely backlit so you can easily pay attention to whatever's more important than the drivers and road around you.

Things Real People Don't Say About Advertising

This one's a site rather than a specific story—a Tumblr, one of several recent sites where people post peculiar missives. Such as, well, things *implied* in advertising that just don't match up real well with real life.

Unfortunately, it's one of those that hasn't really caught on. I tagged it on January 13, 2011. The most recent item is from July 20—and, paging back through *five whole screens* worth of posts, it appears that it's July 20, *2011*. Sure enough. Going to the archive shows a sad story I've called "the arc of enthusiasm" in another setting:

- January 2011: 58 posts
- February 2011: nine posts
- July 2011: one post

Tumbleweeds: forever.

Some of them were clever—e.g. "This ad would work a lot better for me if the logo was just a smidge over to the right." Some were obvious: "Cool! A banner ad!" One works for me, given my attitude toward infographics: "A visual solution? I get it immediately!" (illustrated with a jubilant white-haired man old enough to be my son rather than grandson). And quite a few were inside baseball: "Good God… That slogan perfectly encapsulates the value proposition."

Indeed, as I paged from oldest to newest, it became almost wholly inside baseball: Things that *nobody* outside certain kinds of web-related ad businesses would ever think, much less say. So maybe it's not surprising that it disappeared rapidly: Niche humor is even more fragile than regular humor. And advertisers making fun of themselves: Sigh.

Messing with Spammers' Heads

I suspect most all of us get variants on the Nigerian Prince emails, mostly trapped by Gmail or its equivalent—sometimes the much more pernicious message from an apparent friend who's been held up in some foreign city and desperately needs $2,100 to pay their hotel bill so they can come home. And more. And too many of us get calls from "Microsoft" telling us that our computer is running amok…

Most of us (I'm guessing) ignore them or delete them or, if they're not caught as spam, label them as spam. Or hang up on the phone calls. Some folks have a little fun with it, as in Phil Bradley's January 22, 2011 post at *Phil Bradley's weblog*. It all begins with email from the Bank of Africa asking whether Bradley's really dead, as Mr. Tony West from West Virginia's trying to claim his $500,000 inheritance fund from the UN Compensation Unit.

Bradley takes it from there…and it's an interesting read. He did something similar with a UK-specific telephone scam shortly before that, which you might also find interesting.

A Trader Joe's Survival Guide

Maybe I shouldn't bother with this one at all—except that it's such an odd case of content that appears to depend too much on missing context. It's by Stephanie Georgopulos, dated January 26, 2011 and appearing at *Thought Catalog*—which, we are informed on the About page, is written by contributors who are "at the vanguard of their respective fields" and with content that's "always vetted and (most of the time) edited." It's a place where *important conversations* happen. Ms. Georgopulos ("Steph" on her bio page) is an editor at TC whose work has been featured at all sorts of hot websites.

But here's the thing: This description of shopping at Trader Joe's—which Georgopulos calls "an out-of-body grocery shopping experience" and an "enigmatic wonder"—makes *no sense to me* as one who's use TJ as a secondary grocery store for more than a decade now.

What do I mean? We learn that "Trader Joe's is not popular solely because it is organic. It is popular because it is organic AND cheap." Except that most of the stuff at TJ's not organic. Overall it's probably slightly more organic than Safeway and less than Whole ~~Paycheck~~ Foods. But after that we're informed that TJ's

is so popular that you may have to wait to even get in the door, with cashiers' lines that "wrap around the perimeter of the store" every time she's been there.

This checkout-lines-go-on-forever schtick gets a *lot* of play. A *lot*. That and the upbeat workers, a discussion that's interesting because the writer seems to feel that you can't *possibly* enjoy working in a store filled with "droves of (organic) bargain hunting assholes who can't be bothered to move out of the way for five seconds to allow you to do your job." She's convinced that TJ employees must work "unspeakably long" shifts and must have terrible jobs, and therefore finds it frightening that they're cheerful. I'm not enough of a sociologist to unwrap the class assumptions involved in this discussion, but let it be.

She closes by advising that you stock up on wine, saying "a bottle of wine will run you $2.99 and you'll need it by the time you leave." So I'm pretty sure that the writer's not in California (and from the overall *we're superior and important people here* tone, I'm guessing New York), since I'm damn near certain she means Charles Shaw—which in California really *is* Two Buck Chuck, costing $1.99—although that's now gone up to $2.49. (There's a lot of other wine at TJ's, some of it very well priced; around here, most such wines start at $3.99. I know Charles Shaw goes for $2.99 in some other states.)

I've *never* encountered a cashier's line with more than four people in it in Livermore and rarely in Redwood City, and lines of five or six only occasionally in a different Silicon Valley location. Not when I shop at noon on a weekday, which is usually the worst time. (By 1 p.m., one person ahead of me is typical.) Not when I shop on a weekend. Not on the Monday before Thanksgiving. (I also typically buy one to six items at a time, except when I'm also buying wine—and this writer says "I don't know what kind of person only buys 10 items from Trader Joe's." But the Livermore TJ's rarely has a ten-items-or-less line open—I'm not even sure there is one—so the rest of her comment doesn't apply anyway.)

This was vetted? This was written by somebody at the vanguard of her respective field? Given the lack of context and general attitude, I'd just call it a third-rate attempt at humor. Or maybe the New York (if my guess is right) TJ's really are this absurdly crowded, and since New York (really Manhattan) is *wholly representative of the world*, I'm just deluded.

Amazon as Humor Site Part 43,289

There are times that I wonder whether Amazon's more significant as a seller of stuff (proudly undercutting local merchants and sustainable cities—and *specifically* targeting local bookstores for extinction through special "don't buy local" apps) or as a crowdsourced humor site—sometimes for the reviews (noted earlier for AudioQuest HDMI cables with magical properties and near-mystical prices) but also for the products.

Such as this one, noted on April 25, 2011 at *CNN Tech* in a John D. Sutter item: "Amazon seller lists book at $23,698,655.93—plus shipping." The book is Peter A. Lawrence's *The Making of a Fly: The Genetics of Animal Design* (this link's to WorldCat.org, showing more than 660 library copies of the 1992 book). Michael Eisen blogged about it on April 22, 2011—and unlike the CNN story (with a screen capture showing a relatively modest price for an OP book), Eisen's post as a screen capture showing that price (you have to scroll down a bit: the first screen capture shows *relatively* modest prices in the $2 million range). Eisen suggests what was happening (essentially an odd algorithmic pricing war between two booksellers)—and, a day after that peak, the price dropped to $106.23.

I'm providing both links because I was guided to the Sutter article—but Eisen's may be the place to go. The clear, thoughtful discussion of how this anomaly could have happened is followed by 165 comments. (There are even more on the CNN story, but they're more likely to be mass-site comments.)

As of this writing, there are seven offers of new copies of the book starting at $86.80. Oh, and if you're actually interested in the book and want to see what readers thought of it: Go directly to the final page of reviews, since the first two pages (at this writing) are entirely filled with reviews based on the brief pricing spike. Going to that final page, it appears to be a good book. Perhaps not worth $23 million, but a good book.

Here's to the Crazy Ones

That's part of the title for this long John Siracusa piece, posted May 12, 2011 at *ars technica*. The rest: "a decade of Mac OS X reviews." And I'm citing it not so much to snark about Siracusa as to applaud his willingness to review a decade of *his own writing* on a specific topic and own up to being wrong quite a bit of the time, especially about predictions.

There's nothing wrong with being wrong (especially where predictions are involved). It's normal, it's common, it's part of learning—and it's part of saying bold things. What's unusual is going back

and admitting you *were* wrong. Clearly, Siracusa's not going to be a Thought Leader or guru with that sort of behavior!

The story actually appeared a year earlier and was reposted as nostalgia. This excerpt from early in the piece makes a key point in its first sentence:

> This ten-year marker presents an opportunity to do something technology writers usually avoid. I'm going to look back at some of my hopes and fears from the early days of Mac OS X's development and compare them to the reality of today. Was I right on the money, shrewdly warning of future disasters that did, in fact, come to pass? Or do my predictions now read more like the ravings of a gray-bearded lunatic? It's judgment day.

There are others: Ed Felten used to regularly revisit his predictions, and Peter Suber has done the same. But it's still a rarity, and even more so among high-profile hotshots. Well worth reading—probably more so if you're a Mac person.

The Worst Way to Read an Ebook?

The title on the brief July 1, 2011 Emily Spivack piece at *Pop!Tech* is actually "A great read—via QR codes?" It discusses Books2Barcodes, a site that supposedly "hopes to convert all the world's great books into QR codes."

> Why, you ask, would you want to read *Moby Dick*, *Pride and Prejudice*, or *Ulysses* via 2D bar codes? The archivists, engineers, and library scientists working on this labor of love explain that although the manual process of converting text to QR codes is time-consuming, they're doing this because it'll be *great fun* to read these classics in 800-character snippets on your phone!

Or not. The story continues by outing Mike Lacher, who created the site, with this quote from a *New Yorker* piece:

> I'm fascinated by things that are particularly stupid on the Internet," Lacher said. "I'm curmudgeonly. I find QR codes inconvenient and enjoyed making the process of scanning them even less convenient."

He's not only curmudgeonly, he also apparently had even more time on his hands than I do. The site lists and links to *twelve books* in QR form. One can only wonder whether anybody's ever actually tried to read a book that way—or whether the full texts of the books are actually there. If Lacher's point was to explore the rampant idiocy in overhyping QR codes, he was a little ahead of his time, but perhaps not much. How many librarians were hot on *QR codes everywhere!* in 2010? How many are now? (What? You're still pasting QR codes all over the place in the *sure knowledge* that real soon now all of your patrons will pull out their smartphones and use this ingenious new methodology? Really?)

QR Codes and Digital Exclusivity?

This might be the best place to cite Dave Paul Strohecker and David Banks' September 15, 2011 post at *Sociological Images* making a point I've made before: That QR codes when used to provide *useful* or *important* information contribute to inequality—if you don't have a smartphone, you're SOL. (As one who *chooses* not to carry a smartphone, I'd say "if you don't have a smartphone, these people don't want you as customers"—which makes public library use of QR codes especially unfortunate.)

Actually, though, I'm mistaking Strohecker and Banks' point. They're citing a piece by somebody else (that link is now dead). The bloggers' own take is slightly different:

> QR codes, though, may not be the best example of a digitally-exclusive technology. That is, QR codes have yet to serve as a common conduit of important information—access to such information has similarly meant little in terms of social or economic capital. It turns out that even most people with smartphones don't know what they are or aren't interested in using them. Grimes' understandable frustration the digital divide, combined with the uneven usage of QR codes among mobile phone-using countries, leads us to believe that those black and white squares do more to instill a feeling of digital exclusivity than anything else.

I think the key clause there is at the end of the third sentence: "or aren't interested in using them."

QR Codes Are the Roller-Skating Horses of Advertising

Let's make it a QR Trifecta with this January 27, 2012 piece by Alexis C. Madrigal at *The Atlantic*. Yes, the piece begins with a picture of a roller-skating horse. And, after a picture of a QR code, this terse but good explanation:

> In theory, you stumble across this code on a billboard on a magazine page and you point your smartphone at it. Feeding the picture into a special decoding application transforms the image into a URL to which you are directed. Maybe a movie plays or there is more product information. Conceptually, this is neat. People who are looking at paper but connected to the Internet via their phones can combine the two in one seamless experience.

I'm guessing the second "on" in the first sentence should be an "or"—there aren't a lot of billboards on

magazine pages—but that's not bad. And there's a chart showing how many "action codes" were used month by month, with QR codes shooting up to, well, 500, while Microsoft Tags languish down around 100-200. (The chart lacks horizontal axis labels so it's not clear *what* months are involved, but never mind.)

As Madrigal says, though, the chart only shows you that advertisers want to gather data—not whether anybody's actually using them. Madrigal quotes "eCommerc-consultant" Roman Zemmer:

> If you come across such a harbinger of modern mobility, you grab your smartphone, fire up one of the numerous Apps that are meant to decipher this code, hold your camera in the direction of the code like you were actually taking a picture, wait for the autofocus of your mobile camera to get a clear image and if all works well you are being redirected to some website.

and adds his own thoughts:

> If you really wanted to know about a product that you saw in an ad, wouldn't you rather type its name into Google on your phone and see what comes up? Is it really faster and better to use a QR code that will direct you to part of a marketing campaign rather than getting a broader sweep of information by simply using the browser that you already use all the time on your phone? In the instant cost-benefit analysis I do every time I see a QR code, it has yet to make sense for me to fire up the decoder app I have installed on my phone.

Both Zemmer and Madrigal think QR codes would be replaced by *something*—and largely have, largely (I think) for the wrong reasons. But it's hard to disagree with Madrigal: "this is a novelty more than anything else." A number of commenters disagree, saying how *great* QR codes are.

Mini-Rants

Items not even worth the short comments that usually appear here—sometimes because they've aged too well for full consideration but not quite well enough to ignore.

- It's actually web "journalists" who are more gullible: Remember the story in late July 2011—about how Internet Explorer users were dumber than users of other browsers, based on large-scale IQ tests? As reported on August 3, 2011 at *The Next Web*—one of the sites that ran the story (along with the BBC), and with a snarky comment that *TheNextWeb* readers wouldn't be surprised by this—it was quite the little story. Except that it was a hoax. There was no such study.
- A two-year dossier of your browsing history? This one was *not* a hoax: It was a short-lived proposal in Hawaii's legislature where the fact of its being introduced at all is cringeworthy. The story appeared on January 26, 2012, by Declan McCullagh at *CNet News*—and the bill would have required ISPs to keep track of *every website each customer visited* for two years. Truly: here's the PDF. It doesn't even say a warrant would be required to *look* at these personal histories. Later that day, one legislator backed off, saying the goal was to "protect victims of crimes"—apparently by enabling law enforcement to track anybody's online activities. As you might guess, there are a number of comments.
- In praise of crap technology: That's the subtitle of Thomas Hayden's November 2, 2011 piece at *The Last Word on Nothing*—and you might enjoy it. (The first part: "Ixnay on the iPod.") Hayden's MP3 player isn't a Zune or an iPod: it's a Coby, and he even calls it a "piece of crap." And goes on from there as to why he loves "crap technology" (which is not the same as *crappy* technology—"crap technology" devices actually work, just aren't high-end or even in the middle). He also uses the terms "also-ran technology" and "second-rate technology." Lots'o'comments, including an early one that uses a different description—but that commenter uses a Sansa Clip, not a Coby. I think there's a crucial difference: I wouldn't buy a Coby, but I love Sansa, and SanDisk (its maker) is by no means some generic no-tech company. Sansas aren't crap.

Masthead

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