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Perspective

Differences

Here's a color:

What would you call that color? According to Wikipedia's list of colors, it's Apricot. Which sounds about right to me.

Now, look at this box:

What's that you say? It's also Apricot—in fact, it's exactly the same color?

Here they are, side by side. Does that help?

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The second part doesn't have a standard name that I know of. It's not a *lot* different from the first. The RGB hex value for Apricot is #FBCEB1. The right-hand (and second of the first two) box is #FBCEB2—just a little bluer than the first.

If you looked at the first two boxes and knew *right off the bat* that they were different colors, congratulations: You have strong color discrimination. (I was going to call this PERSPECTIVE "Discrimination," but that word's too tainted to mess with.) If you look at the side-by-side box on a really good display and say, "Dammit, that's the same color all the way across," you're what some would call a Leveler—you ignore subtle differences. Or your color vision just isn't as precise.

I'm guessing most of us are somewhere in between—that many of us wouldn't distinguish the two boxes when seeing them separately, but would be able to see that the two side-by-side boxes are ever-so-slightly different.

Unless, of course, I'm messing with your mind and those are identical segments. (Trust me on this one—or copy the third box to a photo-editing or paint program and use the color picker to see for yourself. I'm not. They are different.)

A whole bunch of you are saying "Who *cares* about that difference?" Which may be a valid response in this case. If you were planning to paint a house one color or the other, distinctions that subtle might make a difference—do you have any idea how many different "whites" there are in interior paints?

Or, for that matter, how far away you have to be from pure white before it stops being white? Here's a challenging image:

"What image?" you say? I can sympathize with that. A color picker will show you (I think) that there are *ten different shades* in that image—pure white and nine off-whites (varying one or two of the three primaries from FF down to FE, FD, or FC). If I stare hard and long, I think I can make out the bottom three rectangles and *maybe* the middle three—but I'm not sure.

Here's another.

There should be seven shades in that image (including the pure white between rectangles), and I suspect most of you will see that if you look very closely. The top three differ in that each goes all the way down to FA for the particular primary color; the second has FC for two of the three primaries, FF for the third (that is, #FCFCFF, #FFFCFC, #FCFFFC). I think all the lower shades would register as versions of white, hard to distinguish but probably different over vast areas of paint; the upper shades are—well, I'll leave that up to you.

Finally, for this set of images, here's one that doesn't rely on color vision or differentiation, and you may find that this one can be used to adjust your display. (You might find it easier to work with the image in the related blog post "Visual three (and an adjustment tool?)", as it's 96 dpi rather than 300 dpi and thus appears much larger.)

This image has 41 colors in all (the 41st being pure white where I was sloppy in drawing rectangles). Each row has ten rectangles and there are four rows. Even the rectangle in the upper left corner isn't pure white (it's #FEFEFE where pure white is #FFFFFF). Each rectangle (across then down) changes all three primary colors by one—which means these are only 40 of the 256 shades of gray between black and white. As I look at this page (on my old Sony 19" LCD display), in "PC mode" I can't really distinguish much in adjacent cases where I've managed to get rectangles to meet precisely (e.g., the third through seventh rectangles on the third row or the last six on the fourth row): I'd be hard-pressed to swear that I can actually distinguish more than, say, a dozen shades of gray in the image.

But enough of color and shade differentiation. This little essay is about differentiations of all sorts. It's also about economics, snobbery and countersnobbery (slobbery?).

Not Only About Colors

Consider a radically different example—this one from my own experience long, long ago, when open-reel magnetic tape was the only way to record something as an amateur (in this case, open hootenannies at Stiles Hall in Berkeley). We had available a bunch of reels of tape—but they weren't well labeled, and some had enough tape for two hours of recording, while others had enough for an hour. The difference was that the tape itself was thicker on some reels.

Back then, I could reliably tell which tape was which by rubbing the tape between thumb and forefinger. It was important to me to be able to make the distinction—swapping tapes during a live session was a nuisance—and either I had a reasonably good ability to distinguish via feel in this case, or I developed it.

Could I do that now? I don't know. I *think* I can tell the difference between 20lb. (or 50lb. for printing paper) and 24lb. (or 60lb.) paper, but since the 24lb. paper on hand is also smoother than the 20lb., I'm not anywhere close to certain I could identify the weight of paper on its own. Hand me an intermediate (22lb.) paper and I'm even less certain I could tell the difference.

Many aspects of life involve close distinctions, spotting and appreciating small differences. I think it's worth thinking about, especially because "small" differences can make big differences in terms of cost and other things—and because I think making these distinctions involves a number of different issues, some economic and some not.

Consider just some of the nuances involved in close distinctions:

1. Cases where there are *no* differences between two things, but people *believe* there to be differences.
2. Cases where there are no *measurable* differences between two things—which is not quite the same as "there are no differences."
3. Cases where the differences are so small that some people can distinguish the differences and other people can't (and never will).
4. Cases where the differences are small but people can learn to make the distinctions.

Now let's move from "some people" to "you" (or me, or him, or her…). There are also…

5. Differences you can distinguish but don't care about.
6. For purchased items, differences you can distinguish but don't care enough about to pay for the item you find better.
7. Differences you can identify in blind testing, and those you can't—but you believe you can identify otherwise.
8. Differences you can identify in direct comparisons but probably wouldn't notice otherwise.

The apricot and near-apricot boxes? For me (definitely) and, I suspect, for many people, they fall into that last category. For some people, they fall into another category. You may notice that the categories overlap.

(I could probably add many more categories—e.g., differences you can distinguish but for which you simply have no preference one way or another—but enough is enough.)

So What?

What's relevant here is that no two of these eight categories are the same. Given that we make choices all the time, some of those choices based on whether we distinguish differences or care about them, it's useful to think about categories of fine distinctions.

It's relevant because it's easy to suppose that differences *you* don't perceive are differences *nobody* perceives, or at least are differences nobody should care about (or pay for). That's especially true where blind testing and measurements are involved.

And it's relevant because these issues are only partly psychological. The trigger for this essay came more than four years ago in the February 2009 *Stereophile*—an editorial about Levelers and Sharpeners that seemed to say there are *general* psychological differences between two categories of people. I discussed the article in the July 2009 *Cites & Insights* (on page 28, "Pity the Poor Leveler"). The editorial was to some extent justifying the enormous price gulf between the highest of high-end audiophile equipment and the amount normal people would spend on a stereo system by saying the rest of us just aren't Sharpeners. Part of what I said then:

> It's a psychological theory, another black-and-white dichotomy, saying we're either Sharpeners or Levelers. Sharpeners exaggerate differences (or, in their minds, are capable of distinguishing differences) while Levelers minimize or ignore differences (or, in the minds of Sharpeners, are deaf). And maybe it's an *inherent personality characteristic*—different people simply have different "just noticeable difference" levels. Or maybe, as the writer suggests, it's learned—and learning to exaggerate (sorry, "notice") difference is "part of the learning process of becoming an audiophile." Oddly, in giving an example, the writer assumes that "seasoned audiophiles" will in fact *hear* differences in every case—but the "relative sharpener" will call the difference something like "a lifting of several veils" while the "relative leveler" will say the difference, "*while worthwhile*, is fairly small." Emphasis added: The writer does not admit to the possibility that a seasoned audiophile will say "What difference?" or "That difference isn't worth a dime, much less $50K."

> And, of course, to be a reviewer, you must be a Sharpener—able to hear minute differences and deem them important. Or maybe to hear differences whether they're there or not…
>
> The writer is actually arguing that, once you've chosen your system, you should switch back to Leveler mode so you can actually enjoy listening to the music. Can you really switch learned hyperacuity and the tendency to exaggerate differences on and off that easily?

I believe that, for most of us in most areas, the truth is somewhere in the middle and differs for different categories. We're more acute or more willing to be acute in some areas, less acute (or less willing to be acute) in others. Sometimes we care about differences, sometimes we don't. I think we get in trouble when we assume that we're right and other people are wrong, especially if we say "there's no difference" or "that difference doesn't matter."

If you detect a little of that in my 2009 comments, you're at least partly right. I *do* believe some reviewers hear differences that aren't there—but I also believe good audio reviewers are probably much more acute listeners than most of us and can hear *real* (but not always measurable) differences that I, for example, might not. Note that the editorial writer did not allow for the possibility that an experienced audiophile simply won't hear a difference or find a difference worthwhile: The writer is making the opposite generalization: that if you're not hyperacute and willing to treat the smallest changes as significant, then you're not an audiophile.

I think both attitudes are dead wrong and unfortunate. I also think they're natural. I mostly believe that, for those of us who care about fine distinctions at all, various areas of life involve various sets of distinguishing and not distinguishing, caring and not caring, being willing to pay for differences or not.

Maybe you could group seven of the eight categories I mentioned earlier into two groups (#1 is a special category, the case where there literally is no difference but people choose to see one anyway): Acuity/perception issues and attitude issues. Which is to say, numbers 2-4 and 7-8 are issues of acuity or perception: Whether a person is *aware* of a difference. Numbers 5 and 6 are attitude issues: Where a person is aware of a difference but doesn't care about it (or doesn't care enough to pay for it).

Consider acuity and perception first—because those are areas where there are reasonable discussions to be had (maybe). For attitude issues, there's not a lot to discuss. Telling somebody they *should* care about a difference they regard as trivial, or they *should* be willing to pay for a difference they're not willing to pay for, is mostly just stupid. Call it snobbery. At the same time, telling somebody they should *not* care about a difference they regard as worth noticing, or they should *not* be willing

to pay a premium for a difference that you either don't notice or don't care about, is also stupid. Call it slobbery.

Physical Limitations

This is the distinction between categories 3 and 4—or possibly between 2, 3 and 4. For almost every sensory phenomenon, some people are physically capable of more acute differentiations than others, even apart from such obvious issues as total blindness and deafness.

Consider sound. Most young adults can hear sounds between 20Hz and 20,000Hz (and feel them below 20Hz, at which point they're vibrations more than sound). Most males over 40 probably can't hear much above 16,000Hz (or even 12,000Hz). With all the lovely high-volume earbuds, too-loud concerts, power tools and other benefits of civilization, a growing number of people of all ages and genders can't hear as well or across as broad a spectrum as they should be able to. If you can't hear anything above 12,000Hz (12 kiloHertz), you probably won't differentiate between different supertweeters in expensive speakers—you *can't* hear the difference.

At the other extreme, there are some people who *can* hear above 20,000Hz—people who can hear dog whistles (and probably find them painful).

But there are lots of aspects of hearing discrimination beyond the spectral limits. Ever noticed that a slightly out-of-tune piano sounds much worse to some people than to others? Some people simply have better pitch discrimination than others (although this may be as much learned as natural). That's different from "perfect pitch," which is a tricky term in any case. (Can you recognize 440Hz as being the A above Middle C? Doesn't help a lot if an orchestra tunes to a different A, as many of them do—European orchestras tend to tune a little higher, as do some American orchestras, and the historic range has been considerable. Wikipedia has an interesting treatment of this. Among other things, some of Bach's organs had a 480Hz A and an English pitchpipe from 1720 had a 380Hz A—two full notes lower.)

Ever noticed that some pianos are more bell-like than others? Part of that *could* be how they're tuned: Whether the two or three strings for each note are tuned precisely the same or are just enough out of tune to produce a "fuller" sound.

Similarly for amplitude: some people can hear much smaller changes in amplitude than others, although it's not always clear whether this is due to physical limitations or learning/preferences.

Other senses

The same is true for all other senses. Even short of anoxia, there's a huge range of acuteness of smell. I group this with taste because, apart from a few basic tastes, most taste is actually smell anyway.

Ditto touch. Are there people who can tell $1 bills from $5 bills in totally dark rooms? I wouldn't be surprised: The printing is different, and that could yield very slight differences in feel—if you either have sufficiently acute sense of touch or have learned to make the most of what you have. My assumed ability to differentiate tape thickness isn't quite in that category (and may, for all I know, be fairly common).

Learning and Practice

The remainder of categories 2, 3 and 4 (especially 3 and 4), and to some extent 7 and 8, involve learning and practice—but also attentiveness.

If I had to guess, I'd guess that many people who have "perfect pitch" have *learned* it through practice.

I'm pretty certain nobody is born with the ability to recognize specific typefaces as what they are, just as nobody's born with the ability to identify one color as salmon and another as apricot. Naming is learned, but to a great extent so is differentiation.

Typeface naming and discrimination

As to both naming and differentiation, consider this paragraph. Is it in the same typeface as the preceding and next paragraph? If not, what typeface is it in—and what is the name of that typeface?

The answer in that case is "It depends." It's in the same *family* of typefaces—Berkeley or Berkeley Oldstyle—but it's technically a different typeface: Berkeley Book rather than Berkeley. (I use Berkeley Book in most of my self-published books. I *used* to use Berkeley Book in *Cites & Insights*; then I switched to Constantia because it was easier to read under difficult circumstances. Later, I changed to Berkeley—which, as you can see, is a little heavier and, to me, easier to read on-screen and in some printing situations. I also switched to Berkeley because it's easier to use boldface: I can just click on the B icon or use Ctrl-B. Berkeley Book, at least in the form I licensed, doesn't include a Bold weight, so you have to define a character style and click on that. If you just use Ctrl-B or the B icon, Word will happily embolden the Berkeley Book, which is sort of ugly. Incidentally, the subheading is in a third related typeface: Berkeley italic.)

Now consider this paragraph. If you asked me to identify the typeface, I'd probably say "Some boring sans serif typeface." I might say "Arial or Helvetica" but I certainly wouldn't know which one—partly because I find them both boring. Actually, since I use Windows, you can probably guess. (I don't own Helvetica.)

Or consider this paragraph. If you asked me to identify the typeface, I'd probably say "Some boring sans serif typeface" or maybe "Some slightly less boring sans serif typeface." It's Trebuchet MS, if you care.

I'd guess at least one reader of this nonsense identified all six typefaces in this PERSPECTIVE right off the bat (the sixth one is used for major headings and essay titles: Friz Quadrata, probably my favorite headline typeface of all). A true typographic purist would probably also be upset at inappropriate kerning (or maybe not—Berkeley does pretty well) and probably cringes each time I squeeze a paragraph a little to eliminate bad breaks. For most of us, however, that squeezing isn't even visible, much less disturbing.

Getting ahead of myself, squeezing may also be an example of category 8. Which is to say, if you only squeeze a few words at the end of a paragraph or maybe the last sentence, it's likely to be more visible than if you squeeze the entire paragraph, simply because the changed text is in closer proximity to the unchanged text.

Did you notice that? The last clause in the previous paragraph is squeezed by 0.2pts. (roughly 2%), the tightest that I ever squeeze type under ordinary circumstances. I *think* that's more visible than my usual practice. I could be wrong. Most of you (myself included on most days) won't notice the squeezing even in this "obvious" case. On the other hand, if I squeeze text by 0.5pts, most of you are likely to notice. That starts to get pretty ugly.

Probably *way* too much about typefaces…

Colors, flavors, scents

What goes for typography goes double for everything else. How many names do you have for shades of pink? How many such shades can you distinguish? Do you suspect you could both name and distinguish a lot subtler differences if you tried to learn to do so—and if you cared?

Similarly with flavors and scents. There would be no point in wine-tasting courses if it wasn't possible for most people to learn to make subtler distinctions among the flavors in wine, and to name those component flavors (to help in discussing them—although I suppose to some people knowing that a wine has specific namable flavors may actually make it taste better).

There are "natural noses," people with extraordinarily subtle senses of smell. But even natural noses need to learn how to identify components of smell—which for a few people, those who work to create perfumes (or to create knockoff scents), is absolutely vital.

Tastes of other sorts? Can you taste the difference between a hamburger made with Kobe beef, one made with Harris Ranch beef and one from your friendly fast-food joint? (Shorn of all toppings and buns,

can you tell the difference between, say, a Burger King patty and a McDonald's patty?) Tasting the differences is probably partly inherent, partly learned. I think Bing cherries taste a lot different from Brooks cherries, while Modesto apricots taste—at best—a little different than Blenheim apricots. I probably couldn't distinguish between guacamole made with a California Hass avocado and guacamole made with a Mexican Fuerte avocado—but I'm sure other people can. (If you were served a lemon tart made with ripe Meyer lemons and one made with Eureka lemons, the most common commercial variety, with everything else in the recipe held constant, I'd guess *most* of you would taste the difference.)

Circumstances

Then there are categories 7 and 8 (which overlap with 2), almost always relating to fairly small differences. Although that's not always true: Some fairly major differences can be masked by blind testing procedures. That's how you get nonsense like claims that all wines (or beers or sodas or…) taste the same: under the right blind-testing procedures and the wrong environmental conditions, an astonishingly wide range of tastes can seem identical.

That's why, even as I make fun of super-expensive audio equipment and the reviewers who review it and proclaim *obvious differences that everybody can hear*, I rarely question that the reviewers *do* hear differences.

That puts me at odds with one group of supposed rationalists who say that, if you can't identify it in short-term ABX blind testing, you can't identify it. (Briefly and possibly incorrectly, an ABX blind test involves a switch with three positions, A, B, and X, connecting two input devices with one output device or vice-versa. X *either* connects to A or B, but the person being tested doesn't know which one. If you can't tell whether X is A or B definitively, the assertion is that there is no difference.) In practice, differentiating under pressure is abnormal and not necessarily conclusive.

You can name your own examples: there are probably hundreds in which some folks say "there is no difference" when what they mean is "I don't perceive a difference" or "I don't care about a difference." One of the classics in audio is that CD audio is "perfect sound" and "bits is bits." Well, yes, bits *is* bits—but there are *measurable* differences in aspects of digital delivery for CD players, just as one example. Is digital jitter audible? Maybe not to me (I'm not sure)—but that doesn't mean it's not to others.

Or, if audio's not your thing, consider "sub-premium beers" (the kind word for PBR and its ilk). Do they all taste the same? Under some circumstances, probably so. Under others, maybe not. Forty years ago, I believe Miller High Life tasted distinctly different than, say, Budweiser.

(That was before Miller was reformulated to be more Popular.) Now? If I cared—which I no longer do—I'm not sure I could distinguish the two. Doesn't mean others can't—or that still others, who regard all beers as déclassé, won't tell you that Anchor Steam and Sierra Nevada Pale Ale are indistinguishable from each other or from Coors.

I'm not going to spend much time on category 2. Whether a difference belongs in category 2 (not measurable) or in category 1 is always open to argument, with the caveat that measuring techniques improve over time.

Preferences

I believe that a lot of skepticism about differences—suggestions that differences in categories 2, 7 or 8 are actually category 1 situations (no difference)—are subconscious cases of categories 5 or 6. Which is to say: If I'm not willing to pay for a difference, or I don't care about a difference, it's easy to say "there is no difference." It's easy; it's also lazy and wrong.

Only the most extreme æsthete pays attention to all differences in all walks of life, no matter how small. I'd regard that as a really difficult way to live, especially if you're not at least a multimillionaire. To *always* focus on the tiniest differences in food, wine, music, typography, clothing and everything else—what a frustrating way to live! For the rest of us, huge categories of real and sometimes fairly large differences fall into the two preference categories, 5 and 6: Either you can notice the difference but you don't care about it, or you can notice the difference but aren't willing to pay for it.

In my flush days, I could not only tell the difference between a typical $8 California chardonnay and a $25 example—and, for that matter, either of those and a $50 Bâtard-Montrachet (back when they were $50 rather than $200+)—I was frequently willing to pay for the difference, at least between the first two. These days, I can still tell the differences among most $2.99-$4.99 wines at Trader Joe's or Grocery Outlet and the $8 to $28 (and up) wines elsewhere—but I'm rarely willing to pay more than $8, and almost never more than $15. It's not that I'm not aware of the differences; I'm just not willing to pay for them (usually—we might spring for a $28 Livermore chardonnay on a very special occasion). Even back then, while I suspected I could tell the difference between a Bâtard-Montrachet and a Montrachet, I was *not* willing to pay the price for the latter—and felt that, even if somebody gave it to me, I'd have trouble appreciating something that expensive. (Now $600 and up from what I can see.)

But if you're a beer drinker who thinks all white wines taste the same—or, worse, that *all* wines taste the same, well, that's your choice. It's only an issue if you think you should choose the beverages at an

event I'm attending…or if you persist in telling me that there are no *real* differences among, say, New Zealand sauvignon blancs.

Going back to sound, there are times I'm suspicious that a difference *might* fall into category 1 (e.g., differences in sound quality between two well-engineered solid-state amplifiers, especially if a null test doesn't yield significant results), but generally it makes sense to say "I know I wouldn't pay for that difference; I don't know whether there is a difference." Under the right circumstances (not likely any more), I could see paying $3,000 for pair of speakers; I could *not* see paying $200,000 for a pair of speakers, even though I'll bet you could demonstrate that the $200,000 pair sound better *to me*. In the latter case, it's not an issue of denying the difference; it's just being unwilling to pay.

Conclusions?

This meandering essay began with a point. I'm not sure I've made it. Here's what I'm trying to say:

We mostly have different levels of discrimination in different aspects of what we do. In some cases, our ability to discriminate is limited by physical issues. In many cases, we can learn to discriminate more finely if we choose to. In many cases, we might be able to learn to discriminate—but might not care.

That you don't care about a particular distinction as much as somebody else does doesn't mean either of you is right or wrong. It just means you're different. Saying "there is no difference" is an extreme stance, one that's hard to demonstrate in most cases. Saying "there's no difference that I care about"—ah, that's entirely normal.

Extreme case? My wife believes Kleenex® facial tissues changed for the worse a couple of years ago, acquiring something that she was unhappy with. We'd already changed *partly* to Safeway's house brand for financial reasons; at that point, we changed *entirely* to the house brand. More recently, trying Kleenex® again suggests that whatever the change was has now changed again. Is it a difference I notice? Not really—but I know that in some areas (scent, aspects of touch) my wife makes finer differentiations than I do. Is it a *real* difference? I'm convinced it is.

And if I suggest otherwise in THE BACK or online, I'm generally wrong. Which happens, of course.

Social Networks
Delicious, Google+ and More

Consider this a summertime version of a social networks essay: All relatively old material, no earth-shattering conclusions. There's part of the kerfuffle when Yahoo! accidentally publicized a planned shutdown of

Delicious; early comments on Google+ and the later brouhaha when Google insisted on real names for users; and a few random notes.

The End of Delicious?

First it was del.icio.us, an early "social bookmarking" service, way back in 2003. Then it was acquired by Yahoo! near the end of 2005. It became Delicious in 2008. By the end of 2008 (according to Wikipedia), Delicious had more than five million users and 180 million unique bookmarked URLs.

Then came December 16, 2010, when an internal slide from a Yahoo! meeting leaked to the open web—a slide saying Delicious would be "sunsetted." That's where our story begins: roughly a dozen items (out of what must have been hundreds) between December 17, 2010 and January 4, 2011. I say "*our* story" advisedly—I used Delicious to organize source material for *Cites & Insights* and other projects, not using it as a "social" bookmarking service since I had no qualms about using peculiar tags, changing tags for my own purposes and deleting tagged items. It was a good tool.

Roughly half of these items are from library sources. That's not a natural mix: I follow library commentaries more closely than others.

Yucky horizon: Yahoo is sunsetting Delicious

Nicole Snyder Dettmar (Nikki) was early out of the gate with this December 16, 2010 post at *eagle dawg*. She links to a *PC Magazine* item saying the shutdown was happening—and the "hilarious front page of Delicious" as of the evening of December 16, 2010, where the top "fresh bookmarks" are a story on the shutdown and a "how to export" item.

Nikki tried to set up a new account quickly, exporting bookmarks into HTML—and trying to set up a Diigo account. She notes that the import tool isn't or wasn't obvious and suggests that bookmarking services should make such capabilities "very *very* visible front and center to the panicking Delicious masses right now." She also noted that, once she did the import, she got the "it may take a while" message—since Diigo was handling a *lot* of these. It's a nice, clean, useful early post.

Et tu, Delicious?

That's the question posed by Diane L. Schrecker in this December 17, 2010 post at *Library Cloud*. Boy, do I empathize with her lead paragraph:

> With more than a little regret and annoyance, I moved my Bloglines feeds to Google Reader when it was announced they would be eliminating the service. (Yes, Bloglines was subsequently purchased by MerchantCircle and users are to migrate to the new system.) Now Yahoo will be closing Delicious. After reading the notice, I logged in to Delicious and exported my 738+ bookmarks. The tags do not display in

> the html list, though they do in the source code, which makes recreating the portal a daunting task.

I also migrated from Bloglines to Google Reader (and *not* back, since the new Bloglines didn't meet my needs)—and have since migrated from Google Reader to feedly, but that's another story. I had a couple thousand bookmarks in Delicious, if memory serves me right.

Schrecker cites and links to three items on the apparent shutdown plans. They're interesting in different ways: Simon Cohen still calls it del.icio.us, Alexia Tsotsis says flatly that Yahoo *is* shutting down Delicious—and Scott Gilbertson implies that with the phrase "Plans to Kill Off." Turns out "sunsetted" did *not* necessarily mean that; we'll get to that later.

Schrecker has what I regard as an appropriate perspective: Yes, there are alternatives—and "these things happen when using a free, dare I say it, cloud based Internet resource." But also Bloglines and Delicious were among her "favorite early 2.0 tools." I won't use the term "2.0 tools" because, well, reasons, but I liked both tools a lot. She considers the real issue to be Yahoo! layoffs…and has the grace to update the post with a link to a *Delicious Blog* post, "What's Next for Delicious?"—but that link is now defunct, so I can only quote the same paragraph she did:

> Many of you have read the news stories about Delicious that began appearing yesterday. We're genuinely sorry to have these stories appear with so little context for our loyal users. While we can't answer each of your questions individually, we wanted to address what we can at this stage and we promise to keep you posted as future plans get finalized.

How did Yahoo! address those stories? The link is defunct…

How George Bailey can Save Delicous

Here's an odd one from Jon Udell, posted December 17, 2010 on his eponymous blog. Udell liked Delicious a *lot*: he says that by 2004 it had "transformed my work practices more profoundly than almost anything else before or since." He's also written about it a lot—the post begins by linking to ten of his favorites of the "scores of essays" he's written about it.

Udell focuses on "how we can preserve the value we collectively create online." Since I never used Delicious as a social service, I can only take his word for the enormous value of collaborative named sets of online resources.

Udell's actual point—and the post's title? He thinks you need a *cooperative* service to assure the continued health of collaborative tagged sets (George Bailey ran a credit union-like coop, not a traditional bank), and suggests that users "collectively make Yahoo! an offer, buy in as shareholders, and run the service ourselves."

The final paragraph of the post is a bit more optimistic than I'd be:

> It's bound to happen sooner or later. My top Christmas wish: delicious goes first.

Have there been any user-funded, *user-owned* and *user-operated* web services to date? If so, I'm not aware of it (which isn't surprising).

wither delicious?

That's angela at *mélange* on December 17, 2010. She asserts that Delicious is (was?) "the social bookmarking tool most loved by libraries" and maintained a list of such libraries. She says "There is no substitute" for Delicious.

> Delicious brought social tagging and serendipitous search to the forefront of the web 2.0 movement. It's the first tool most of us started using in our introduction to web 2.0 courses for a reason. Remember the joy you felt when searching the collective knowledge of a particular tag, only to find something else, all the more exciting and worthwhile? That's gone folks. Bye, bye Delicious. It was good while it lasted.

She mentions trying Mag.nolia, CiteULike, StumbleUpon and Zotero. She doesn't mention diigo.

Former Yahoo Exec: "Delicious Is in Peril," Sale Unlikely

Jolie O'Dell wrote this December 16, 2010 item at *Mashable*, and once you get past the flood of ads and social-network overhead (it took me 1.5 screens of scrolling), it's a reasonable news story. The exec is Stephen Hood and he wrote "as someone who was on the inside for a while and who wants very much to see Delicious live on." Hood mentions why he thought the service was unlikely to be sold—e.g., it had been rebuilt to "deeply leverage a number of internal Yahoo technologies." That also pretty much precludes open sourcing or Udell's user-operated idea.

Oddly enough for *Mashable* I don't see any comments—or maybe they expire after a while?

Yahoo, You Flubbed News About The Future Of Delicious, Not The Press

Danny Sullivan offered that opinion on December 17, 2010 at *Search Engine Land*. That site held off publishing the rumor until Yahoo offered a statement—but, Sullivan says, "That statement clarified nothing." Here's the statement:

> Part of our organizational streamlining involves cutting our investment in underperforming or off-strategy products to put better focus on our core strengths and fund new innovation in the next year and beyond. We continuously evaluate and prioritize our portfolio of products and services, and do plan to shut down some products in the coming months

> such as Yahoo! Buzz, our Traffic APIs, and others. We will communicate specific plans when appropriate.

Here's what Sullivan says about that statement—and remember earlier where I quoted Yahoo!s explicit disappointment at press treatment of this situation:

> See anything about Delicious there? Nope. Not a word. Nothing like, "We plan to sell it to someone else" or "No, we're not going to close it" or any of that context that Yahoo is now whining that the press somehow failed to provide.

Then it gets interesting. Sullivan has Twitter screenshots showing that a top Yahoo! exec replied to a tweet showing the leaked Powerpoint slide with this: "Really dude? Can't wait to find out how you got the web cast. Whoever it is, gone." So, as Sullivan says, time for threats but no time for clarification.

Sullivan even followed up on that non-statement with a specific question, to which the reply was "We're not commenting on Delicious specifically at this point." At which point the company starts to lose the high ground in bitching about press coverage. His conclusion, after noting that a story on alternatives to Delicious was now the most-read story at *Search Engine Land*:

> By the time Yahoo gets around to selling off Delicious, there might be few people left actually using it. That's all due to Yahoo's own ineptness, in assuming product news wouldn't leak and in not being prepared in case of such a leak to communicate clearly that the service's near term future wasn't in doubt.

Delicious and other Services—Have a Backup Plan?

David Lee King asks that eminently sensible question in this December 20, 2010 post on his eponymous blog.

> So last week, some of you probably heard that the Delicious.com service was possibly being – their term – "sunset." Then they announced that it wasn't, and that they hope to find another home for the service outside of Yahoo.

The post has a link for "they announced that it wasn't"—but it now leads to a 404. King notes that his library doesn't use Delicious for its website, but he's aware that some others rely on it pretty heavily. (He suggests Diigo as an alternative).

> Here's what I'm interested in – how much do we depend on these third party services for essential parts of our website? Delicious is one example … what if Yahoo decided to do the same thing to Flickr, or if Google decided to do that to Youtube or even their Google Accounts

> (many organizations have switched their email/storage/messaging systems to Google from hosting them in-house)?

He suggests that the major problem isn't libraries like his—it's smaller libraries "that don't have dedicated web dudes."

Here I need to pause for a comment I might not have made a couple of years ago. "Dedicated web dudes" really is not OK as a general description of people who work on websites. They're not all "dudes," and assuming that they might as well be helps maintain a fairly apparent pattern of casual sexism in technology. This isn't a criticism of David Lee King. It was two years ago, and I'm pretty sure David's not a sexist, just an idiomatic writer (generally a good thing, in my opinion)—but in 2013 at least, we've gone too long excusing pervasive, harmful attitudes as being the way things are. Calling *yourself* a web dude: Fine. Assuming that all library web workers are "dudes": Not fine. Now, back to the discussion…

His basic suggestion is to "be vigilant," but it's also a suggestion that really only works for well-staffed libraries, especially when he gets to the details:

- stay up-to-date on web tools by trying them out, reading about them, etc
- pick the best tool at the time – look for features and stability – ok, and awesomeness :-)
- switch services when the next, better tool comes around – instead of waiting until one service closes its doors

Somehow, I don't see that happening in smaller public libraries. Of course, most of them probably aren't using Delicious for essential parts of their websites anyway. Now, if Wordpress was to suddenly disappear…

The Dilemma with Delicious

Brian Herzog chimed in with this December 21, 2010 post at *Swiss Army Librarian*. Herzog's public library based its subject guides on Delicious and Herzog had been "telling people for years to convert to Delicious." He thought it might not be *so* bad "because the demise of Bloglines was announced and averted."

That may not be a good example. Both of those links are to earlier posts by Herzog, and as he says himself, Bloglines turned out to be "backish"—yes, there was a service named Bloglines; no, some of us who'd loved Bloglines didn't find it satisfactory.

> So, for the time being, I'm not panicking—but it is a perfect reminder that we need to face the realities of third-party tools with eyes wide open. You can integrate anything you want into your website, but remember it may go away at any time.

Herzog outlined his own plans and said he was considering Diigo. (Looking at later posts, it appears that he tried it out, but may have stuck

with the new Delicious. In one later post, he seemed to think librarian bloggers should have paid *more* attention to Delicious than they did; my own sense is that it got plenty of attention.)

Delicious is still tasty to me

So says Anna Creech in this December 21, 2010 post at *eclectic librarian*. It's an interesting post. Excerpts:

> I've been seeing many of my friends and peers jump ship and move their social/online bookmarks to other services (both free and paid) since the Yahoo leak about Delicious being in the sun-setting category of products. Given the volume of outcry over this, I was pretty confident that either Yahoo would change their minds or someone would buy Delicious or someone would replicate Delicious. So, I didn't worry. I didn't freak out. I haven't even made a backup of my bookmarks, although I plan to do that soon just because it's good to have backups of data…
>
> The technorati are a fickle bunch. I get that. But I can't help feeling disappointed in how quickly they jumped ship and stayed on the raft even when it became clear that it was just a leaky faucet and not a hole in the hull.

In between, she notes the likelihood of a sale and that she wasn't impressed with other bookmarking services—especially ones that aren't integrated into a browser. (Diigo plays nicely with Firefox: That's one reason I've stuck with it.)

The last paragraph struck me as a bit off—I didn't think some of us were being fickle so much as practical. I even left a comment:

> Having never thought of myself as either technorati or fickle, the fact is that my uses of delicious were pretty vital to keeping Cites & Insights going--and that "we're going to be sold" message was nowhere near reassuring (you know, when I was let go I could have published a post saying "I'll be employed elsewhere soon"--which wouldn't make it true). I also saw the Bloglines parallel: Where it was, in fact, purchased--but "it" was now something I found nearly useless.
>
> I won't argue that you're wrong for sticking with delicious; if you're disappointed that I felt it would be irresponsible of me not to find an alternative, that's unfortunate.

I'll stand by that comment. For a *vital* tool, you start looking for alternatives as soon as you hear of trouble—and if you find a viable alternative that seems to be more likely to stick around, it makes sense to migrate. (I noted immediately that Diigo was inserting ads into the result stream, and while that was mildly annoying it was also a source of revenue for Diigo. That was—and is—encouraging.)

Yahoo!locaust

Jason Scott applied his inimitable style to the Delicious situation in this December 23, 2010 post at *ASCII*. He starts with the screenshot that began the whole thing, with this text underneath it: "This little purple piece of crap is the screenshot heard around the world."

He notes the kind of stuff the Archive Team does—e.g., saving Geocities content for posterity, which got a lot of attention Then he notes what happened with the Delicious leak:

> With the dropping of this screenshot, however, came a hundred calls for us to "do something" or to simply let us know, knowing we would "do something".
>
> If you haven't seen the screenshot before, it was snagged off an internal status meeting amid a multi-hundred-layoff at Yahoo! and leaked to the world, and it revealed the "sunset" of a multitude of services, the "merge" of others, and "make feature" of some other ones. Obviously "sunset" got the most attention, because that's the kind of mealy-mouthed language one would expect out of assholes. It's the same thinking that took "mass firings" to "downsizing" and then made it "rightsizing" because they thought "downsizing" was too negative. Those sort of assholes. The kind that run Yahoo!, in other words.

His paragraph to those wishing to defend Yahoo uses slightly stronger language; you can go to the original post (it's a quoted-text paragraph). Then he talks about how the Archive Team does and doesn't work…and the virtues of Delicious.

It's an interesting post. Scott *really* doesn't like Yahoo! and offers some cogent reasons for his attitudes. He says Delicious really couldn't be sold as an operating entity (which I believe turned out to be true) and notes that you usually don't fire all the staff of an operation that you actually intend to sell—before putting it up for sale.

The comments are interesting.

What's Your Delicious Story?

Mark Matienzo asked that on January 4, 2011 at *TheSecretMirror.com*. He had an earlier post about Delicious as a platform and, in this case, decided to go for more direct responses:

> I want to gather information about how people like you and me actually used it beyond it's obvious functionality. Did you use it to manage resources for your dissertation? Did you use it to communicate with family about a serious event or illness? How did you go beyond the boundaries of it being just "about bookmarks"? How did it make you think about how you organize your information environment? I want personal stories that talk about what you may

> lose, however intangible it might seem, when Delicious eventually shuts down.

Just a few responses (and a few others in a related Quora post), including, naturally, the comment that Delicious might *not* shut down. Perhaps worth reading both streams for examples of what Delicious was doing. (The first comment here is from a librarian whose library still has a Delicious account—but the most recent addition was "2 years ago," in other words, sometime in fairly early 2011.)

What's happened since?

That was the story just after the leaked Yahoo! information. Lots of comments from librarians and others. Lots of us decided to move to something else—I think I moved to Diigo within a week of the announcement. Some grumbling about such moves. Yahoo! telling us that "sunsetting" didn't necessarily *mean* shutting down, even if all of the team had been fired. ("Roughly a dozen" at the head of this section? I started out with a dozen; I eliminated one along the way.)

What's happened since? Back to Wikipedia:

- In April 2011 Yahoo! did manage to sell Delicious to AVOS Systems.
- AVOS exists, as does Delicious—and maybe you'll find the AVOS site more informative than I did. The site mostly suggests that you follow the company on Facebook or Google+. The most recent update on Facebook is 14 months old as I write this.
- According to Wikipedia, Yahoo! was actually operating the site until September 2011—at which point AVOS introduced a redesign that was not well received. Since then, it's had several revisions.
- The most recent item in the Wikipedia article is from October 2012, with a Delicious plan to "roll out another beta version over the next month to improve the site's functionality." That was nine months ago.
- The site's still there. As of this writing, Alexa says it's the 1,476th most popular site on the internet (1,819th in the U.S.). I haven't heard much about it from library folks lately. It's telling that "recent" AVOS comments are on the difficulty of pleasing the current user base.

Google+: The First Days

An assortment of items about Google+ shortly after its founding (near the end of June 2011). I find it particularly interesting to look back at some of the early comments—and the extent to which Google+ was seen

as an inevitable huge success. (Full disclosure: I'm on Google+ [henceforth G+]. As of June 7, 2013, I have 164 people in circles—and 507 people have me in circles. I've found that it takes maybe two or three minutes a day to catch up with *everything* that shows up on my account: It's just not very active. But then, neither am I!)

Google+ Solves the Social Privacy Problem by Making Friending Very Complicated

So says Liz Gannes on June 29, 2011 at *All Things D*. Gannes came to this conclusion after a single day's use of G+ and finds Circles difficult to understand. I tend to agree that *if* you think of all social networking as "friending," the G+ model is complicated—because it's different. It is, in a way, inverted: when someone adds you to their circle, they're pushing (some) content to you—if you read your Incoming stream. And you (or they) can selectively see who gets content by choosing to communicate within Circles. If you don't add someone to a Circle, *they won't see* what you post to that Circle. Is that complicated?

G+ gets rid of the nonsensical notion that social networking is all about friends. It isn't and probably never has been, and more recently even Facebook has allowed Following without mutual Friending.

I don't find the G+ model complicated, certainly not more so than Gannes' description of Myspace. In all, I find this (possibly premature) judgment a little curious. Or maybe that's because privacy and friending aren't necessarily closely related? It's fair to say that many (most) of the commenters disagree with Gannes.

The One Google Plus Feature Facebook Should Fear

Given that this appeared on *AllFacebook*, "The Unofficial Facebook Blog," you know going in that this (by Nick O'Neill on June 30, 2011) was going to be more about G+'s impact on Facebook than G+ itself. The feature? "Time on the site."

O'Neill's first reaction was unsurprising: "Why on earth would anybody switch to this from Facebook?" I wonder why "switch" is the operative word—but not as much as I wondered about the next paragraph:

> However, when I loaded up Google Finance as I do every morning, I suddenly realized that I was asking the wrong question. The reality is that *users won't have the option of not using Google Plus*. [Emphasis in the original]

Why is that? Because Google has more users than Facebook—and because of "that big notifications box in the top right of all Google sites." When I look at Google or other Google sites, I see a tiny little box next to my name—a box that sometimes has a red number in it. I ignore that red number most of the time, but I'm clearly not Nick O'Neill:

> As I'm browsing around Google-powered sites there's occasionally a red notification alert that pops up and immediately grabs my attention. Soon enough I'm clicking through the various notifications and seeing what my friends have shared and who has recently begun sharing with me.

And Google automatically signs up all Google users for G+, so…oh wait. It doesn't do that. But O'Neill seems to think it does or might as well:

> No, Google Plus is not a "Facebook killer," but despite the company's numerous failed attempts at getting into social media, the new Plus product gives users no other option but to accept the fact that Google is becoming exactly that: social.

Glancing at the first few (most recent) of more than 200 comments, I immediately notice something I also noticed on Gannes' piece: A lack of attention to spam clearance. Which surely helps increase the comment count! Indeed, I gave up—even though comments dropped back to "2 years ago" (that is, around the time the post appeared) rather quickly, there are so *many* spamments that it didn't seem worthwhile to look for actual commentary.

My thoughts 24 hours into Google+

Another example of why some people are Proper Pundits and others aren't: The ability to draw overarching conclusions based on almost no actual experience. This time, it's Keith Crawford on July 1, 2011 at *KnowtheNetwork.com*. And he is, how you say, positive, based on this lead paragraph:

> Google+ is the smartest social network I've ever used and it has more potential to change how I use the web than anything I've seen in a decade.

Whew. He calls it "Facebook without the noise & junk, Twitter with context & 1000x more functionality, Friendfeed without the cacophony of aggregated content." All positive comments, nothing negative, and of course Crawford is one of those who talks about "social graph." His conclusions:

> I might be overly exuberant due to shiny-new-object syndrome but it has exceeded all my expectations. It's polished and just lovely.
>
> Google learned the lessons of wave & buzz and I think they have a hit on their hands.
>
> Will it kill Facebook in the foreseeable future? No. But competition is sorely needed & Google+ just changed the game.
>
> No idea where it's headed but I'm a fan.

He links to what I assume was supposed to be his Google+ account. Which, as of June 10, 2013, yields a 404. Searching within Google+ yields several Keith Crawfords; the one I assume to be the same person has maybe ten posts in 2012, so he's not so thrilled with it that it's a primary tool.

Google+ is social signals data for search

While I'm not sure I even understand that title, this July 3, 2011 post by Richard Akerman at *Science Library Pad* begins with a solid lead:

> I think it's a mistake to think of Google+ as a Facebook replacement or even as an attempt to replace Facebook.
>
> Google has a basic problem: they make their money from search ads. Mostly from search ads when people are looking to buy something. So a search like "best 2009 used cars" represents a ton of money for them. A Facebook posting "hey guys, can anyone recommend a good 2009 used car?" is a disaster for Google. Not only is it probably invisible to their indexing engine, it connects people to information without search intermediation that you can attach ads to.

He adds commentary and closes with this:

> So I think Google+ is mainly about providing Google with enormous amounts of data that it can analyse to determine social signals for search, to understand Q&A social behaviour, to find out how people are grouped and interconnected, and to have data to drive social driven re-ranking and display. But most importantly by far, it gives Google the beginnings of data to optimise ads for the social graph. Would you rather pay 1 cent to display your ad to someone who has zero tech influence, or $1000 to get your ad in front of the eyeballs of a tech influencer whose posts are reposted and retweeted thousands of times? Would you rather pay 1 cent to display an ad to random people based on search keywords, or $100 to display the ad to a "circle" of people who have demonstrated a sustained interconnected interest in your particular topic?

Would anybody pay $1,000 to get an ad in front of a "tech influencer"? Dunno. An interesting perspective, though—and one that only works if *lots* of people adopt Google+ as a place they hang out a lot. So far, that hasn't really happened. (Akerman did an extensive first-day post on Google+, with updates.)

Google+ is Active, not Passive, Social Networking

So says Jim MacLennan, posting July 4, 2011 at *cazh1*, and he includes a video overview along with written commentary (presented in a user interface I find truly annoying, but that's a different issue). It's fair to say he's less impressed than some—he finds the interface unimpressive and

Circles "cute." But he's also looking at Google+ as an "enterprise tool," which may not be Google's intent.

The "active, not passive" line is because Google+ doesn't make it easy to do all the drive-by posting that drives me (but apparently not others) crazy—you know, when a single post is automatically reposted to Twitter, Facebook, Friendfeed, LinkedIn, whatever. "Content doesn't make it into Google+ unless I specifically put it in there." What a notion! I think that's a good thing; for MacLennan it's a defect.

His final boldface heading is "Social Networking for the Enterprise," and I don't think he's talking about Star Trek. More's the pity. You will not be surprised that MacLennan seems to think of ordinary people as "consumers." You will also not be surprised that I don't much care for that as a default description of people who don't happen to be corporations.

What is Google+ for?

David Weinberger waited a full week to ask this question on July 8, 2011 at *Joho the Blog*—and he links to Edward Vielmetti's Google+ account, where Vielmetti presumably asked the same question. (The link goes to the account, not the post, and since Vielmetti uses Google+ a *lot* I didn't try to track back two years.)

Weinberger doesn't offer his own answer. Instead, the rest of the post is a compete requote of Peter Kaminski's answer—and it's just as well that he requotes in full, since the Kaminski Google+ link yields a (guess what!) 404. Briefly, Kaminski thinks the purpose is to "keep you within the Google web," to make sure you spend as much time as possible on Google sites.

I'm not impressed by Kaminski's offhand remarks about how other companies are doing in trying to trap all of your Digital Life, but I'm not looking for one site to rule them all in any case.

How Google+ Will Balkanize Your Social Life

This one's more of an article than a post—by Paul Boutin on July 11, 2011 at *Technology Review*. The subhead: "For many, the new service offers the chance to press 'reset on Facebook.'"

Boutin thinks lots of us will find that Google+ is "the other social network they need to use" because "a significant fraction of their friends will force them to." Because we're too wussy to defriend those Facebook "friends" we don't really want to interact with…

Boutin thinks the lack of friend requests is a "killer feature" for Google+--since "most other social networks" rely on that. (Ever hear of Twitter?) Although, as he does note, if you don't add someone to your Circles after they add you to theirs, *they will know* (indirectly)—and, Paul, *you start seeing these people's posts* unless you carefully avoid your main stream. So I'm not quite sure how that's a killer feature.

Apparently Boutin's *obliged* to network with lots of people on Facebook, so he likes Google+ because (at that point) it doesn't have so many people.

As one comment points out, the negative tone of the headline (unless "Balkanize" has somehow become positive) doesn't match the generally enthusiastic tone of the article.

Google Plus—Should you and your Library be there?

Now we hear from some librarians, such as David Lee King, writing on July 15, 2011 at his eponymous blog. King properly scoffs at some big claims for G+ (most of which I haven't seen, but…), notes that it's only a week old, then tries to answer the question.

He says "You" should *absolutely* sign up. Because, you know, we all have time to play with every new tool, just in case.

As for the library—he says it's "a bit more tricky," but it isn't, since—as he says—G+ wasn't supporting organizational accounts at the time and shut down any it encountered.

His long-term response is right on the money:

> Once that happens, and Google OKs organizational accounts – should you be there? The answer is … it depends. Are your users there? If so, then yes. Recent national stats claim that 51% of people age 12 and up are on Facebook – that's 51% of your community, so it definitely makes sense for most libraries and organizations to have a Facebook presence.

There's a little more, but that's the key point, and it's a sensible one.

So what is Google+ all about then?

Phil Bradley's question and thoughtful answer comes on July 19, 2011 on his eponymous blog. He begins:

> I've seen lots of blog posts and articles and discussions on what G+ is about, and how it is a this killer or that killer. If I had a penny for each of them I'd be quite rich. Does that stop me writing my own? Of course it doesn't.
>
> G+ isn't an anything killer. Sure, I imagine that Google would love it if Twitter got whumped, or Facebook fell off the face of the earth as we all flocked like dutiful sheep across to G+, but it's not happening anytime soon. And, as per my previous blog post, Microsoft is going to be wading into the mire in the not too distant future with their offering. G+ isn't (and this is of course all just my own opinion) bothered about them. Google is doing what Google always does, and that's to go after the money.

Then Bradley gets down to it: Google makes money by serving ads—but if its search engine does a good job, you've left Google and its ads.

"Google doesn't make money out of being a good search engine, it makes money out of being good at serving us with appropriate adverts that match our search." Meanwhile, Facebook tries to get companies to come to Facebook so users will just stay there.

Bradley's most interested in the integration heralded by the black toolbar at the top of all Google sites after G+ came around, and the constant reminder to "click on that little red notification box." Bradley also finds the he has a better G+ experience in Chrome—and expected to see more and more Google applications become part of G+.

Bradley thinks that libraries and librarians need to know this stuff and that libraries are likely to need to create presences on G+. Oh, and to use the +1 feature, because people should "see the kind of thing that their librarian thinks is important." Maybe.

He closes with a graph showing that, while G+ at that point only had about ten million users, it took no time at all (16 days) to reach that point, compared to more than two years for Twitter and even longer for Facebook. "That's why librarians need to know about G+, and that's why it's important."

5 Reasons Google+ Is A Privacy Accident (Disaster?) Waiting to Happen

This surprisingly contrarian post is from Bobbi Newman on July 22, 2011 at *Librarian by Day*. Her five reasons?

You think it has better privacy controls. For some reason, Newman sees this as the *biggest* problem—"your belief that you are 'safer.'" Which you are, by all accounts.

It's still in Beta. Which might be more meaningful if (a) Google didn't tend to leave things in Beta for *years* and (b) *all* social networks didn't change frequently, beta or not. Saying "It also means that this isn't the finished product, things could change" makes one absurd assumption: That there's such a thing as a "finished product" in social networking.

The follow vs. friend vs. circle confusion. She thinks this is too complicated. And it's true that if you intend to post to one circle but instead hit Public, everybody will see the post. In other words: If you use G+ badly, it will work badly. Just like Facebook and Twitter and…

Google isn't up front about how they are using and storing your information. Which makes them, what, *unique* among web services? 'Cuz Facebook always told us exactly what it was doing and never, ever undermined our beliefs.

Google+ For Mobile. Which boils down to "what if there's a glitch and your sexting goes public?"

You're putting all of your eggs in one basket. What? So far, I have yet to see any Google+ recommendations that you stop using FB or Twitter or LinkedIn or FriendFeed; they don't even have a friendly

"Dump all my other networks" button. Seems to me G+ provides another basket.

This whole post strikes me as odd and surprisingly negative. It boils down to Newman's assertion that G+ "isn't better than any of [Facebook or Twitter or Friendfeed]"—which I think is a strong statement. Not being better than Facebook at screwing around with privacy would take a *lot* of work; I don't think G+ did quite that badly.

Some commenters disagree with her; one who agrees seems to think that all social networks should work the way FB used to work: That is, nobody can see your stuff unless you've explicitly agreed that they should be able to. Good luck with that.

Google+: A Few Later Views

Before returning to a specific controversy at Google+, let's look at a few later commentaries.

One month with Google+: why this social network has legs

That's Jacqui Cheng on August 7, 2011 at *ars technica*, and the first couple of paragraphs are especially interesting:

> If you're a stranger who follows me on Google+, you might think I rarely use the service. That's because the majority of my posts have been limited to the seven circles I created for friends, acquaintances, family, Ars staffers, and other people I like to expose to various aspects of my personality. You had no idea? That's exactly the point.
>
> After one month with Google+, it's clear to me that this—sending updates to certain groups of people and not to others—is the main appeal of the service. I was one of the first people to loudly declare that you can do the same thing on Facebook, but so few people know this that it's basically a nonexistent feature; that's the problem with Facebook. With Google+, sending out certain updates to some people and other updates to other people is right at the forefront of the experience. You are always asked to make a conscious decision about your social circles and about which circles get to see which posts.

Cheng notes that she was "a fierce skeptic of Google+" when first announced—but it's grown on her. She offers a fairly detailed explanation of how Circles work and why they're important (and why they may seem annoying; to Facebook users)—specifically, a reasonably straightforward way to decide *post by post* which groups should see what you say. She also likes the fact that you can see *your* posts from somebody else's perspective: if they're on G+, you can view their profile and see whether the right posts are showing up.

Did you know Facebook had a 400 character limit? I didn't; Cheng discovered this when writing this article. G+ has no limit (I've seen some *very* long posts from people using G+ as a pseudoblog).

There's more—this is a moderately long article—including perceptive analysis of why G+ won't wipe out Facebook or Twitter. She concludes that the service has legs. "Now it's up to Google to see how far it can run."

It's *ars technica*, so naturally there are quite a few comments and many of them are worth reading. Some are reminders that what some folks love others of us hate—for example, MarksAngel, who doesn't like G+ because it won't be part of their "forwarding deal"—that is, post once, bug people on three or four or six different networks. MarksAngel calls it "integration." (No, I didn't read all the comments.)

How Google+ will succeed and why you'll use it whether you want to or not.

That silly headline appears on this August 24, 2011 story at *The Next Web* by Tom Anderson, "the founder & former President of MySpace." I guess Anderson's responding to some "Google+ is doomed" stories (which I haven't cited here); he focuses on the "public, Twitter-like component" of G+ and stresses the broad reach of Google's top four sites (although including blogger.com strikes me as odd). And, of course, those sites are important because of the "little red notification indicator."

We hear Anderson's version of how other social networks grew and how that works out for G+. I'm not sure of the veracity of his account. I'm also not sure I agree with Anderson's assertion that all G+ really needs are lots of high-profile "content creators," "people like Robert Scoble, Guy Kawasaki…"

As I read the essay, I sense that Anderson assumes that *most* G+ users will use Public for *most* posts; otherwise, his claim that G+ is a combination of Facebook and Twitter doesn't hold water. No, you can't just follow anybody—not and get much from them. Not unless they post everything to Public. Not unless, in other words, *they* decide to use G+ as longform Twitter.

Here's a bold sentence for August 2011: "In fact, I've seen many people say they've left Twitter behind in favor of G+." Really? *Many* people?

Then there's the "whether you want to or not" story, and I have to admit I regard that as sheer nonsense, a view I believe holds up in June 2013. The idea? Well, those "key people" whose content actually *matters* will move to G+ one by one; and then your friends will start using G+; and then "you're going to get pulled into this site, whether you want to be a user or not." Right.

I found this wholly unconvincing. Am I the only one who regards the numbers in that little red box as meaningless? (There were *no*

comments on this article; either *TNW* has a tiny audience or nobody cared.)

Why Google Search Plus is a disaster for search

I made fun of Bobbi Newman's "privacy disaster" doom-crying—but Phil Bradley's January 13, 2012 post is a little different and points out a real (potential) problem. To wit, Google's announcement of using your social community to affect your search results. He's not surprised Google wanted to do this—he'd been talking about it for some time. "What is surprising, although it shouldn't be, is the inept way that they have done it." Which he describes carefully, with appropriate screenshots.

As he describes it, it's pretty awful. With personalized results turned on…

> I'm looking at what Google regards as my personal data. That is to say, information that I've produced, or that has been produced by people that I follow. However, this is only pulling data from what GOOGLE decides is 'my world' and that world is very limited. First of all, there are two references on the first page of results from what I've said in my own Google+ account, but I don't actually need to see those thanks very much, because I wrote them. Six of the results are from other Google+ accounts belonging to people that I follow. There are two from Google's own Blogspot (Blogger) service which leaves 1 result from a Twitter account that I don't follow, but it's included because someone that I follow on Google+ recommended it. So everything that I'm getting is related to my presence on Google. No reference to my own Twitter account, or Facebook pages, or from any of the other resources that I use, of which there are many. It's not that Google doesn't know about them, or at least some of them, since I told it about my other profiles, so it knows all about my Flickr account for example. However, it hasn't pulled in any data from those sites. So 'World' in Google Search+ terms, means 'Google World'.
>
> How much of an issue is this? It's a seriously large issue, because it immediately limits what I see to a small subsection of my actual world. I'm not seeing content from all my contacts, just those that Google chooses to show me. If you think that there are anti-trust implications in this you would be right. Only those contacts of mine who are active in Google+ are showing up, and this is one of the reasons why I have been encouraging people to get G+ accounts and to become active in that arena. I don't like it, but Google is essentially doing its best to force everyone into that service. As long as Google remains the key search engine out there, and as long as we continue to use it, we're going to have to play by their rules.

It's not just that it hurts other social networks—it hurts searchers. In Bradley's opinion (one I share, albeit with much less knowledge) it's "not

a helpful service at all." And there's more, described in some detail. For example, "people and pages on Google+" start showing up on the Google right-hand pane It boils down to this: "Google cannot be trusted to give accurate relevant search results any longer." (Emphasis in the original.)

There's more to the post and I'd suggest you read it in the original. Oh, and that you consider using Bing or DuckDuckGo as your primary search engine (I've been using Bing for months now).

I'm not sure what's changed in the meantime—maybe Google got lots of pushback on this. The one-touch personalization doesn't show up for me. I can go into my Settings and turn on Personal Search, but I haven't done so.

How Google Can Beat Facebook Without Google Plus

Here's a full-length article, by Alexis C. Madrigal on May 24, 2012 at *The Atlantic*—and I'm mostly just linking to it because as I read it, I find I'm completely confounded by what Madrigal's trying to say. Apparently G+ is an "abandoned city" while Google's failing to capitalize on the social principal in its other sites and…nope, I'm clearly not getting it.

Maybe you will. Maybe I'm just dense. Heck, I didn't even realize that people stopped moving to LA after 1957 and all moved to Phoenix (and places like it) instead. But then, that's not even Madrigal's key point. His key point is…nope, I'm too dense. It's a long story, and maybe long stories on the screen defeat me.

I Am Not a Number…

Sure, that's the wrong heading, but it's about time to sneak in a *The Prisoner* reference, right? In this case, however, it's the other way around: Some people *want* to use something other than their "real" name for some online interactions—frequently for very good reasons. (For that matter, what's your "real" name? My legal name, the one on my passport and most credit cards and all airline tickets, is slightly different than my *usual* name, the one I use in all online activities—including Google+.)

Google+ wanted (wants?) real names. It shut down pseudonymous accounts. There were reactions. Here are some of them.

Pseudonyms, masks, red herrings, and Google Plus

We begin with a librarian—who blogs under a pseudonym, Library Loon, as in this July 25, 2011 post at *Gavia Libraria*.

> Google Plus debuted recently, to cautiously positive reviews. The Loon is debarred from giving it a try (despite the existence of her GMail account) because she is, of course, a pseudonym, and Google Plus doesn't want anything to do with mere pseudonyms.

> The Loon, therefore, deferred to the BAE to test it out. The BAE didn't last a week, and is leaving the Loon to attempt an explanation. (Division of social labor. It's a useful conceit now and then.)

BAE = Boring Alter Ego, who "has gotten herself into employment trouble many a time via blogging." The post discusses some of the difficulties *and benefits* of being outspoken on the web (and, although she doesn't say so, being an outspoken *woman* is part of the problem), and the difficulty of separating work and non-work behavior, especially in environments where bosses "believe that one's off-hours belong to the job in some way."

There are also problematic people online—e.g., "harassers or misogynists." Put this all together and the Loon makes an excellent case for being the Loon rather than BAE. She also talks about the benefits of undiscoverability or difficult discoverability—the ability to say things in a less-than-wholly-public or less-than-wholly-signed manner.

I'm badly summarizing a very good discussion of *why* pseudonymity makes sense, for some people, some times. She notes this about Google+:

> The Loon wonders whether Google understands that by insisting on Real Names(tm) in Google Plus, it is limiting discourse to that which is acceptable to employers—and that is a sad, impoverished discourse indeed. Circles do not help with this, since even a circle-limited posting can easily reach people for whom it was not intended.

So there's that—and I think the case is pretty solid. More solid, to be sure, for pseudonyms such as Library Loon that can't possibly be confused with real people. It's clear that this particular librarian isn't named Library Loon. It's also clear that she uses this persona for valid reasons. At least I think they're valid.

Google is right to demand people use real names

Not everybody agrees—as is clear from the title of this Joe Wilcox piece, "published two years ago" (on or before July 26, 2011, given when I tagged it) at *betanews*. The lead:

> Google, don't cow before riffraff demanding that you allow Google Plusers to use pseudonyms or to be anonymous. The policy of using real names is sensible and best approach long term.
>
> While I was at San Diego Comic-Con this weekend, there was a big row about suspended Google+ accounts -- so I'm playing catch up on this one. Well, thank you, Google! I mean that without the slightest hint of sarcasm. That's a sincere *thank you*.

Wilcox explains that the Google terms of service require that Google Profiles "use the name that you commonly go by in daily life." (Aha! Google *doesn't* mean real names—they mean everyday names. So I'm legitimately *not* Walter C. Crawford to Google; I'm Walt Crawford.)

Google started enforcing that policy by suspending Google Profiles and G+ accounts. Wilcox thinks this is great:

> If Google suspended your Google Profile and therefore G+ account, and it was collateral damage, please accept my apologies for reveling over your misery. Google's policy of real people associated with accounts is a sensible one. Time to enforce such policy is now, while the service is invite-only and restricted to people 18 or older. It's about time *somebody* put the kibosh on anonymous accounts and started making people using the web to be identifiable and therefore more accountable for their behavior. The only problem I really see is enforcement. Google+ is growing so fast—and that's while invite-only—account monitoring could take an army of people.

Note one thing here—something I've almost always found to be true when somebody insists on real names only: Wilcox doesn't distinguish between *pseudonymity* and *anonymity*. They are not *at all* the same thing, and lumping them together is remarkably sloppy. The Library Loon is not anonymous. She's pseudonymous.

Wilcox apparently can't see a distinction. After linking to a call for restoring accounts that use pseudonymity and citing a petition for Google to "allow pseudonyms," he goes back to talking about anonymity as though the two were identical. Oh, and he *knows* that he has the majority view:

> There are plenty more places where people can interact anonymously than there are places where they must be identified. There's an underserved majority of people who want to know who they are engaging with, want to build relationships with people they can identify. Google+ could be that place.

How does he know that a majority of people hate pseudonymity? Got me.

Later, as he enumerates the "very good reasons" Google shouldn't allow obscured identities, it becomes clear that he doesn't think there's a *useful* distinction between pseudonymity and anonymity. But when you're in a discussion claiming that allowing pseudonym is a *security risk*, I'm not sure how seriously to take that. (His other reasons: Community, Google+ for Business and Trolls. Yes, of course, business users want to make sure they know *exactly* who they're dealing with—which is one good reason for pseudonymity.)

I wasn't convinced. The 100 comments are a mixed bag, some faulting Wilcox' logic and some agreeing, including this classic (quoted in full):

> If you don't want to, or can't, use your real name, there is no one holding a gun to your head forcing you to use the service.

I bet that commenter has a ready answer for anybody who desires privacy as well!

Pseudonymity and Google

Here's Janet D. Stemwedel writing on July 25, 2011 at *Adventures in Ethics & Science* on the same topic, and she notes Violet Blue's point that Google isn't *quite* uniform in its enforcement: Lady Gaga's profile was still intact after a bunch of other G+ accounts had been deleted. According to Violet Blue (here and here), people weren't notified in advance and *some* people seem to have lost access to other Google products such as Gmail and were being asked to use names that are on government-issued IDs. (I encourage you to click on that second "here"—it's an excellent discussion and explains clearly *why* pseudonyms are important and even necessary for some people.) Stemwedel comments:

> There are those who argue that a real-name policy is the only effective deterrent to bad online behavior, but I have yet to see convincing evidence that this is so. You'd be hard-pressed to find a better citizen of the blogosphere than SciCurious, and "SciCurious" is not the name on her birth certificate or driver's license. However, I'd argue that "SciCurious" *is her real name in the blogosphere*, given that it is connected to a vast catalog of blog posts, comments, interviews, and other traces that convey a reliable picture of the kind of person she is. Meanwhile, there are people using their legal names online who feel free to encourage violence against others. Is it more civil because they're not using pseudonyms to applaud car-bombs?

She also notes that most of us really don't know whether the name we see online is the *really true name* of the person: "the safest default assumption is that *everyone* is signing up with an assumed name." In the comments, she also has an excellent response to someone who wants "at least one place where people have to use their real names." I do not find his response convincing.

Why Google cares if you use your real name

This one's odd—from Dave Winer on July 25, 2011 at *Scripting News*. I find it odd because I think it states the obvious and ignores the set of real issues.

The obvious?

> There's a very simple business reason why Google cares if they have your real name. It means it's possible to cross-relate your account with your buying behavior with their partners, who might be banks, retailers, supermarkets, hospitals, airlines. To connect with your use of cell phones that might be running their mobile operating system. To provide identity in a commerce-ready way. And to give them

> information about what you do on the Internet, without obfuscation of pseudonyms.
>
> Simply put, a real name is worth more than a fake one.

True enough: Google can sell ads better the better it can identify you. So?

It's an easy enough way to get around arguments that don't interest you: "It's about the money." True enough, but—especially for a corporation with a silly slogan about evil—maybe it shouldn't be the end of the discussion.

Why Facebook and Google's Concept of 'Real Names' Is Revolutionary

In this August 5, 2011 item at *The Atlantic*, Alexis C. Madrigal says some interesting things—while showing a touch of the tone-deafness that he has at times, as in when he (sigh) fails to distinguish between anonymity and pseudonymity until very late in the article.

His major point? That *in real life* many everyday comments are, in effect, anonymous or at best pseudonymous.

> Imagine you're walking down the street and you say out loud, "Down with the government!" For all non-megastars, the vast majority of people within earshot will have no idea who you are. They won't have access to your employment history or your social network or any of the other things that a Google search allows one to find. The only information they really have about you is your physical characteristics and mode of dress, which are data-rich but which cannot be directly or easily connected to your actual identity. In my case, bystanders would know that a 5'9", 165 pound probably Caucasian male with half a beard said, "Down with the government!" Neither my speech or the context in which it occurred is preserved. And as soon as I leave the immediate vicinity, no one can definitively prove that I said, "Down with the government!"

As he thinks about that more, he finds a "continuum of publicness and persistence and anonymity" for everyday speech depending on what and where you are. "In real life, we expect very few statements to be public, persistent, and attached to your real identity." [Emphasis in the original.] So the online reality—what you say is preserved indefinitely and trackable to you—isn't the norm for everyday life. As to pseudonyms? I like Madrigal's wording: "In the language we were using earlier, pseudonyms allow statements to be public and persistent, but not attached to one's real identity." [Emphasis in the original.]

Google Plus: Too Much Unnecessary Drama

This August 23, 2011 piece by Violet Blue on ZDNet is well worth reading—not only because Violet Blue (yes, that's her "real" name)

writes well but also because it spells out just how bizarre the whole Google name enforcement situation had become.

See, here's the thing: Unlike, say, Walt Crawford, Violet Blue is not a nobody—not even to Google. She's done two Tech Talks at the Googleplex. Her name could be verified by Google in several different ways. But, sigh, she visited G+:

> for the first time in a week to discover that I was about to be banned and have my account suspended from G+.
>
> I was instructed to change my profile to comply with the Google+ "real name" policy—even though I am using my real name on the service.
>
> My real name, they told me, was not my real name.

And, as she says, she was guilty until proven innocent. Given the way this worked, if she'd been off G+ all weekend, she would have come back on Monday to find herself locked out.

Read the whole thing. I may not agree with her on every issue (e.g., Google being a utility), but I certainly agree on the key ones here.

Oh: By Monday, Google had decided that Violet Blue *is* Violet Blue—her profile was still there and now had a "Verified Account" checkmark. Not that Google let her know that. Well, they did—quite a few hours later. (Just checked: *I* don't have such a checkmark and have no idea how to get it. I do know that I can't have a verified Google Scholar account—because I don't have an institutional email address, and therefore can't possibly be an actual scholar. Let's not get into that.)

The comments? Some of them are pretty sad, including the pseudonymous troll who suggests that Violet Blue can't actually be her real name—and apparently suggesting that Google should check her birth certificate. The troll probably thinks she was born in Kenya.

Google wants to own your online identity

In one sense, this August 29, 2011 piece by Phil (not his real name!) Bradley at his eponymous blog is making the same point Dave Winer was: Google makes money via its ad network and advertisers like to know who people are.

But there's more here and it's well worth reading. It comes later, after Eric Schmidt offered a stupid comment similar to his earlier "You have no privacy. Get over it" comment—this time saying Google's taking a hard line, and if you don't like it, don't use Google.

Why you should *really* read this is the fourth paragraph, starting "Do we—as librarians," where Bradley addresses librarian issues. It's a clear, vigorous and thoughtful discussion, and I think the best way to comment on it is to say: Go read it.

Google Plus forces us to discuss identity

Cory Doctorow's August 30, 2011 piece at *the guardian* is as good an end to this section as any. I particularly like the third paragraph of the opening three quoted below:

> Google Plus's controversial identity policy requires all users to use their "real names". Commentators have pointed to problems with this, including the implausibility of Google being able to determine correctly which names are real and which ones are fake. Other problems include the absurdity of Google's demand for scans of government ID to accomplish this task and the fractal implausibility of Google being able to discern real from fake in all forms of government ID.
>
> Google argues that people behave better when they use their real names. Google also states it is offering an identity service, not a social network, and therefore needs to know who you are and, thirdly, that no one is forcing you to use Google Plus.
>
> However valid the first two points may be, they are eclipsed by the monumental intellectual dishonesty of that last one – no one's holding a gun to your head, so shut up if you don't like it.

Doctorow spends some time on that point, on a "simplistic theory of critical discourse" he finds "perfectly incoherent." He then offers four reasons that Google's policy requires a critical debate—and that's a set of discussions that are better read in the original.

Me? I'm still on G+. But, of course, "Walt Crawford" isn't my *real* real name—and I'm just fortunate that the Midwestern ornithologist (also Walter C. Crawford and typically using Walt) didn't sign up for Google and G+ before I did!

Just for Fun

We'll finish with a handful of miscellaneous items, mostly just for fun.

Why the Social Media Revolution Is About to Get a Little Less Awesome

Revolution? Awesome? Really? In fact, this Derek Thomson September 10, 2012 item at *The Atlantic* boils down to one thing: After the Facebook IPO, the pressure's going to be on most services to *monetize, monetize, monetize*. You can't just build a big audience; you have to have an actual revenue model.

That's shortchanging the piece, which offers some fairly good logic—and notes that it's amazing that so many free apps and networks and the like really *didn't* have any obvious source of revenue.

> The first few years of the social media revolution have been a golden age of tech utilitarianism, where maximizing users' delight was considered, quite literally, the only currency that mattered. In Part II of the revolution, the desired currency is poised to change from attention to profit. That's a shame. It doesn't mean that the programs you love are anywhere close to coming to an end. It just means that things are about to get a little less awesome.

Quite a few comments, a surprisingly large number both coherent and interesting.

FriendFeed Turns 5. The One-Time Pioneer Is Still Here.

So Louis Gray says on October 1, 2012 at *louisgray.com*. I would say "chances are most of you have never *heard* of FriendFeed," but if you read *Cites & Insights*, that's unlikely.

Gray offers a capsule history. I'd forgotten that it's been nearly *four years* since Facebook acquired FriendFeed (and lots of folks said "Oh no! FriendFeed's doomed!"): That happened in August 2009. It's true that FF hasn't developed much since then—but it was such a well-designed network that it also hasn't mattered all that much to the (relatively few) millions of folks who still use it, including the 928 library folk in LSW. (Truly: nine hundred and twenty eight. In a network left for dead nearly four years ago.)

The piece discusses ten "challenging problems" FriendFeed attempted to solve, and it's an interesting discussion. I don't actually use FF properly: I leave it in Pause rather than having real-time updates to the stream, because I find it hard to read through a stream when it keeps moving stuff down the page every now and then.

Here's an interesting paragraph, under the heading "And It Stayed Up When Others Didn't," and I hope it's all true:

> At a time when Twitter was as known for its fail whale as anything else, FriendFeed refused to crash. The team had learned how to scale the product so that even under periods of peak load, sluggish behavior was practically absent. Only in the seemingly annual event of datacenter failures, and eventual site rot due to abandonment for practically three years, has seen the product unavailable. In fact, as the legend tells it, one of the caveats for signing off on the 2009 acquisition was one of the cofounder's wives making the request that FriendFeed stay alive as an independent service indefinitely—which has happened.

Gray wonders whether FF will be around another five years. So do I. So do, I suspect, most of the core LSW folks who actually *use* FF. A lot. We've established beachheads elsewhere just in case, but most of us would as soon not have to migrate. I like FF a lot: it's my primary social network. Lots of its good features have shown up, one way or another,

elsewhere (obviously including at Facebook)—but I still like the overall feel there, and the fact that it *doesn't* have a billion members.

The 29 comments no longer appear.

I had two more items for this section—and left both of them out, one because the message really didn't mesh well with the sender, one because it felt too much like very little but personal aggrandizement (not *my* huge ego, but somebody else's). And then, as I was drafting this roundup, I encountered this, which really does seem like a good finish:

Less Noise For More Signal

That's Steven Bell's advice in this June 12, 2013 "From the Bell Tower" at *Library Journal*. Bell regards social networks as useful and entertaining, "but constant status updates—particularly those of questionable value—ultimately add to the noise and detract from the learning."

Bell rarely updates on Facebook or Twitter, even though he originally believed that "the goal was to update several times a day." He never managed (nor have I).

> I suppose I could have, but at what cost? I derived little satisfaction in spewing out status updates of questionable interest to anyone else: *where I was; my next action; what I just saw; my latest uninspiring thought*. Everyone is accustomed to these types of updates and filters them in whatever way works best. My problem was feeling badly about contributing to a spiraling mass of content that no one really needs. And though updates take just a minute to type—thoughtful ones just a bit more—in aggregate it's still time squandered, if the activity is mostly unproductive.

I'm sure FourSquare (or however it's called) updates are meaningful to somebody. I'm just not sure who.

Bell explicitly says that he's not trying to determine why some librarians "issue constant status updates on their social networking tools" or even to critique that, although he links to an essay by someone who does just that.

Mostly, Bell's focusing on what the title implies: Less noise equals more signal. If you're reasonably selective in your use of social networks, what you *do* say may get more attention—and I suspect that's even more relevant for libraries.

It's an interesting column. Am I suggesting that any given person should cut back on the oversharing? No; different people have different styles and different audiences. I do suspect it's worth, once in a while, thinking about your own signal-to-noise ratio. Is noise drowning out the signal?

Media

Mystery Collection, Part 6

Discs 31-36 of this 60-disc, 250-movie collection.

Disc 31

Double Cross, 1941, b&w. Albert H. Kelley (dir.), Kane Richmond, Pauline Moore, Wynne Gibson, John Miljan. 1:02.

> One of those hour-long programmers that keeps right on moving. This time, a cop's gotten friendly with a hard-edged woman who co-owns (?) a nightclub/gambling hall. He's visiting her when he should be on duty. When the cops raid the joint, she manages to grab his gun, shoot another cop and shove the gun into his hands as the cops shoot him. That's just one double-cross in a movie that has its share.
>
> The bulk of the plot involves another cop (friend of the first one), his fiancée (who takes photos at the club), his father (a police captain who's about to be named commissioner), some semi-undercover work, the backer of the club who sees to it that it keeps reopening (big surprise here) and a surprisingly effective movie. Nothing really special, but this one works. Given the length, I'll give it $1.

Ellis Island, 1936, b&w. Phil Rosen (dir.), Donald Cook, Peggy Shannon, Jack La Rue, Joyce Compton, Bradley Page, Johnny Arthur, George Rosener. 1:07.

> This oddity is a semi-slapstick comedy about a park ranger who cheats on his long-time fiancée, gets caught at it, wants his buddy ranger to bail him out by lying (saying it was the buddy's cousin and the ranger was just meeting her at the train as a favor)…and eventually Gets the Girl. Which is a little sad, actually, since he's a cheating jerk.
>
> The movie's "mystery" plot is about a ten-year-old bank robbery (one that suggests Federal Reserve guards are worthless) that yielded $1 million, with the trio of robbers—all immigrants—captured and put away for ten years. Now they're out and being deported (through Ellis Island, where part of the action takes place), with a deportation process that seems to assume nobody's ever going to put up a fuss or try to escape. Various shenanigans, with hoodlums trying to find out where the money's hidden, a phony Treasury agent also trying to find the money, the niece of one of the bandits involved and a moderately clever twist.
>
> Not great, not terrible, but an unsettled blend of semi-mystery, romantic comedy, slapstick comedy and more (there's a stereotypic farmer-with-shotgun, the "get offa' my land, you chicken thieves!"

type). It does not help that the cheating boyfriend is an incredibly annoying character. I can't give it more than $0.75.

Exile Express, 1939, b&w. Otis Garrett (dir.), Anna Sten, Alan Marshal, Jerome Cowan. 1:11 [1:09]

Another one that's part slapstick, part murder mystery (with a spy story and an evil chemical formula thrown in), part romance. And partly seems as though they're making it up as they go along.

The plot: A beautiful Ukrainian immigrant is a chemist's assistant, on the eve of getting her citizenship. She's being courted by a handsome young rogue she doesn't really love. The chemist has combined a number of specific pesticides to create a super-pesticide that's sort of a permanent Round-Up: It not only kills all the pests *and all the crops*, it makes the land useless for years to come. He plans to turn it over to the Feds…and when a spy shoots him, he manages to spill acid on the formula before he dies. (The assistant, having been approached by a spy from her homeland, calls him and warns him—and as he's about to put the formula in his safe, he gets shot.)

The cops assume that the woman had something to do with it and send her off for deportation after she's acquitted (I guess—it's just a bunch of headlines). Since she's in San Francisco and you can only deport people from Ellis Island, she's put on the "exile express," a four-day train ride, along with a tax evader/big-shot criminal who's happy enough to be going home. And a dashing young reporter who's looking for some story, although it's not quite clear what. Oh, there's also a bedraggled Bolshevik; after anybody talks to him, they start scratching themselves.

Anyhoo…the young rogue sees to it that she escapes from the train with the story that she'll get married to some American chump, go across the border to Canada, then come back as the wife of a citizen—but, of course, the young rogue's really the spy's boss. Without going into the rest of the plot, let's just say that she winds up happily (I guess) married to the reporter.

All a little helter-skelter. OK, really, it's a mess. The print's mixed, but the sound's worse: It fades in and out, possibly due to some automatic attempt to reduce background noise (it's dead silent *except* when there's dialog or sound effects, at which point there's *lots* of background noise—and sometimes the fade-in misses a line of dialog). I suspect this kind of mixed-genre short movie was enormously popular at one point, but it's hard to make work well. $0.75.

Hollywood Stadium Mystery, 1938, b&w. David Howard (dir.), Neil Hamilton, Evelyn Venable, Jimmy Wallington, Barbara Pepper, Lucien Littlefield, Lynne Roberts, Smiley Burnette. 1:06 [0:53]

Based on the description, I was expecting another variation on the "Who in this big crowd pulled the trigger?" theme—but this nonstop flick isn't quite that. There's a murder in the first two minutes, but that's *not* the crime. We have a beautiful female mystery writer and a handsome male DA who meet cute, are immediately antagonistic to one another and *of course* are going to wind up married by the end of the movie. We have a couple of actual murders—one of them the challenger to a boxing title, murdered in a way that involves an odd scent. We have a comedian playing himself, doing a little act to distract people being held for questioning. We have a murderer who seems like an unlikely candidate. There's humor, some misdirection and generally almost too much plot for a short film. All in all, fun and well done. Based on the sleeve's "66 minute" timing, the movie's missing 13 minutes. In any case, I'll give it $1.00.

Disc 32

Hold That Woman, 1940, b&w. Sam Newfield (dir.), James Dunn, Frances Gifford, George Douglas, Rita La Roy, Martin Spellman, Eddie Fetherston. 1:07 [1:04]

This fast-moving comedy (not much mystery, although there's plenty of crime) is set in an LA where apparently nobody actually *pays* for anything and people move every few days to avoid being held accountable, thus keeping an army of skip tracers employed: People who go out to either get money from the skipper or retrieve the item.

Skip-Tracers Ltd. has a star tracer—and another guy who doesn't do so well (and who deeply resents the fair-haired boy but never says why). He's told that he has 30 days to ship up or ship out, and given two easy assignments to do before his date that evening: A fur coat and a radio. Next thing we see, he's picking up his date—the beautiful daughter of a cop—and hands her this great new coat to wear for the evening. Oh, and they have to stop on the way to the nightclub to pick up that radio…and when he tries to do that, he gets arrested.

One thing leads to another, with repossessions and "un-repossessions" all over the place, a jewel robbery with an obvious suspect (who's obviously guilty: not much mystery here), a wealthy Hollywood starlet with an odd accent and a tendency to love whoever's handy…and a skip tracer who has impulse-control problems. As with: When you're about to get fired and have $600 to your name, what's more reasonable than to propose on the spot, get married, rent a house and spend the rest of your cash on a houseload of furniture? (Which turns out to be…you guessed it.)

Lots of action, a fair amount of fun, reasonably well played. Silly, but (or "Silly, and")… I'll give it $1.00.

Midnight Limited, 1940, b&w. Howard Bretherton (dir.), John King, Marjorie Reynolds, George Cleveland, Edward Keane, Monte Collins. 1:02.

> The night train from New York to Montreal is the setting for a series of robberies—always in Car 1 (next to the baggage car), always the same MO. In the first one, a young woman—not the intended victim—has crucial papers stolen because the robber wants to intimidate her. She needs the papers and keeps bugging the railroad detectives until one of them takes a fancy to the case (and to her).
>
> That's the basic plot, and as you'd expect it winds up with the couple getting married, with a fair amount of plot in between. (The plot doesn't always make sense, but…) The problem I had with this fairly typical low-budget B mystery is the dialog and acting of the head detective and the hero: They both sounded like they were reading from a dictionary, and the dialog seemed wholly artificial. That clumsiness reduces an otherwise typical buck-a-pop hour-long B to $0.75.

Murder At Dawn, 1932, b&w. Richard Thorpe (dir.), Jack Mulhall, Josephine Dunn, Eddie Boland, Marjorie Beebe, Martha Mattox, Mischa Auer, Phillips Smalley, Crauford Kent, Frank Ball. 1:02 [0:51]

> There is a plot, to be sure. A young couple about to get married head upstate to her father's mysterious lodge/laboratory, accompanied by another married couple (the husband a cheerful alcoholic). They arrive at a remote train station where the only conveyance is the source of some sad ethnic humor…and eventually at the house (which the driver didn't want to take them to). Meanwhile, the father's just completed his invention, a solar-powered source of unlimited energy! which works equally well under artificial lighting! and will revolutionize the world! According to one review, the lab equipment (with lots of sparks and the like) was the same used in the original *Frankenstein*.
>
> From there we get lots of secret passages, low-key spooky housekeeper, mysterious characters of all sorts, the drunken bumbling and childish screaming of the male friend, one murder, at least one assumed murder and some varied number of unknown folks stalking other unknown folks. I guess it all ends well, but it's so incoherent that it's hard to tell. Apparently 11 minutes of an already-short flick are missing; it's possible (but unlikely) that it would be more coherent if it was complete. Mostly this is just dumb, in a mediocre print. Charitably, $0.75.

Murder at Glen Athol, 1936, b&w. Frank R. Strayer (dir.), John Miljan, Irene Ware, Iris Adrian, Noel Madison, Oscar Apfel, Barry Norton, Harry Holman, Betty Blythe. 1:04 [1:07]

The suave detective on holiday (at a wealthy friend's home, the friend conveniently gone), trying to write a book while his former-prizefighter pal (they've saved each other's life) is vacuuming, butlering and generally interfering. The neighbors add complicated family stuff—including a golddigger who's divorced one person for a fat settlement, driven a husband into the asylum and now wants to get rid of him and marry his brother…and who comes on to the detective, but also has a beautiful and not quite so bizarre friend. Gangsters (I guess) also come into the play—partly because the slut/golddigger/party girl is blackmailing one of them.

What follows: Lots'o'plot but remarkably little real *motion*, to the point that I may have nodded off once or twice. Three murders (well, five deaths…). It all winds up with the detective marrying the beautiful friend after a (courtship? a few conversations) lasting perhaps two or three days, and justice sort-of done.

Somehow, this one just didn't work. I didn't care about the mystery, I didn't care about the detective, the friend, the victims, anybody. Charitably, $0.75.

Disc 33

Murder by Invitation, 1941, b&w. Phil Rosen (dir.), Wallace Ford, Marian Marsh, Sarah Padden, Gavin Gordon, George Guhl, Wallis Clark, Minerva Urecal, J. Arthur Young. 1:07 [1:05]

In some ways this is a murder-mystery cliché: Aged wealthy person sends a command invitation to the relatives to go to his/her estate or be stricken from the will—and said relatives start to disappear.

But this one has pizazz. The aged wealthy person starts out as defendant in a court hearing in which her nephew the attorney and other relatives want to have her declared mentally incompetent and sent to an institution—so they can take care of her $3 million. That goes nowhere, as she's mildly eccentric but clearly not incompetent. Then she sends The Invitation. Along the way, a columnist and his Girl Friday get involved, first at the competency hearing and then with the murders.

It's nicely done for this kind of fast-moving B mystery, with a couple of twists toward the end that I certainly didn't see coming. Funny, surprising, fast-moving. Nothing great here, but even as a B flick an easy $1.25.

The Murder in the Museum, 1934, b&w. Melville Shyer (dir.), Henry B. Walthall, John Harron, Phyllis Barrington, Tom O'Brien, Joseph W. Girard. 1:05.

The museum, in this case, is a sideshow—a set of carny attractions whose owner also runs a drug-running operation out of the back

room. Based on a series of tips, a city councilman shows up with the police commissioner in tow—but there's also the commissioner's beautiful niece and a young reporter, both arriving independently.

The councilman winds up shot. The commissioner was clearly his enemy (both were running for mayor) and is a natural suspect because he was one of few who could have smuggled a gun out. The reporter (who's already a hot item with the niece) sets out to clear his name by discovering the truth.

There's more, to be sure, including a happy ending of sorts, but it's all somehow slow moving and languid in an odd way, with some actors seeming to be reading their lines. The best parts may be the sideshow and the sad set of people involved—including a cohort of Pancho Villa turned knife-thrower and a philosophy professor turned magician. It's not terrible, but it's a long way from being top-notch even for a B murder mystery. Charitably, $0.75.

I Cover the Waterfront, 1933, b&w. James Cruze (dir.), Ben Lyon, Claudette Colbert, Ernest Torrence, Hobart Cavanaugh, Maurice Black. 1:15 [1:01].

Previously reviewed as part of *50 Movie Pack Hollywood Legends* in *Cites & Insights* 9.1 (January 2009). $1.00

The Dark Hour, 1936, b&w. Charles Lamont (dir.), Ray Walker, Berton Churchill, Irene Ware, Hobart Bosworth, Hedda Hopper, E.E. Clive, Harold Goodwin, William V. Mong. 1:04 [1:09]

We begin with a middle-aged man (in full suit) bantering with a younger man about the younger man's courtship of the older man's neighbors' niece (with the couple meeting at the older man's house because her two greedy and wealthy old uncles can't stand the young man). We progress from there to…well, quite a bit. The middle-aged man is a retired police detective; the younger one is a current police detective. There's a third neighboring house, with the uncles' sister-in-law living there to protect the niece.

During the course of the film, one uncle winds up dead—stabbed, but with remarkably little blood resulting. The uncles' butler also winds up dead, stabbed with the same knife (and this time there's blood). A chemist boarding with the retired cop (and also after the niece) disappears. We learn that the uncles own apartment buildings that were torched (and heavily insured). There's a Lady in Black who may not be a lady. And lots, lots more—culminating in two impending marriages, a guilty party taken off for justice (for both murders and burning down his own buildings)—and a triple twist at the end involving the *real* killer of the uncle, with the clarity that nobody involved much cares about the death.

Surprisingly good. Not great, but even as a B flick it's an easy $1.25.

Disc 34

The Last Alarm, 1940, b&w. William West (dir.), J. Farrell MacDonald, Polly Ann Young, Warren Hull, George Pembroke, Mary Gordon. 1:01.

Remember when people were "pensioned" at a fixed age—and retired folks didn't know what to do with all that leisure time? That bit of nostalgia is at the heart of this film, which begins and ends with a whole bunch of firemen (and spouses) sitting around a dinner table with the fire chief speechifying. In the first case, it's to send a retiring captain off in style; in the second…well, you'll get there.

The captain apparently had no interests other than pinochle with other firefighters and firefighting. He's completely at odds at home, getting in his wife's way, breaking dishes when trying to help dry them, etc., etc. Meanwhile, an insurance investigator who's also engaged to the captain's daughter is having problems because an arsonist is at work—an arsonist who appears to be a pyromaniac. Eventually, the retired captain gets involved and—thanks largely to a remarkable coincidence having to do with an antique set of salt and pepper shakers the daughter covets—tracks down the culprit, who responds by…

No, that's enough. You might enjoy this. It's only an hour long, but it's well done; I'll give it the maximum $1.25 for a B flick.

The Panther's Claw, William Beaudine (dir.), Sidney Blackmer, Rick Vallin, Byron Foulger, Herbert Rawlinson, Barry Bernard, Gerta Rozan. 1:10 [1:11]

We open with a mild-mannered middle-aged man (Foulger) clambering over the wall of a cemetery and being picked up by passing cops, since it's the middle of the night (which we only know because the cops say so: it's lit like mid-day). He explains that he was there leaving $1,000 on the top of an aunt's headstone because a letter told him to…

A few hours later, the increasingly frustrated little man is in a lineup (which makes no sense at all, and apparently he's now charged with suspected robbery for…well, for the fact that when the cops looked at the headstone, the wallet no longer had the $1,000 the man put in it, so he apparently robbed himself?) and winds up in Commissioner Colt's office, where he sees a bunch of acquaintances, all from the local opera (either New York Opera or Gotham Opera, depending on the scene): he's a wigmaker and they've all dealt with him. And all have had similar letters from The Panther's Claw—except that the rest of them, instead of forking over the $1,000, went to the police.

That's just the first fifteen minutes. We eventually get to the murder of an opera diva who's *supposed* to be sailing to South America but is

actually holed up in an apartment; a DA who's somehow certain that this meek little man, who has always fully cooperated with the cops, is The Killer Who Should Burn; another wigmaker getting shot; lots—*lots*—of talk; the apparent reality that in 1942 New York the cops could just walk in and search any apartment any time they wanted, search warrants be damned. Oh, there's a happy ending of sorts.

It's slow moving, the DA's attitude makes no sense at all, but Colt's amusing (Blackmer), the framed wigmaker's amusing, the whole thing's fairly amusing. Therefore, $1.00.

The Red House, 1947, b&w. Delmer Daves (dir.), Edward G. Robinson, Lon McCallister, Judith Anderson, Rory Calhoun, Allene Roberts, Julie London. 1:40.

It opens with narration about the farm area it's set in—all the girls are good looking, while the boys tend to graduate a little late because they take time off to help with the harvest. This leads us to our heroine, who lives with her adoptive parents—who are an aging wooden-legged farmer and his sister, living on a remote farm. There's also a young man who's involved with the trampy beauty of the high school (a 21-year-old Julie London), and who gets hired on to help the farmer at the girl's urging. (His single mom runs a failing local store and the family's short on money.)

Trouble—and the actual plot—begins when the boy works up to suppertime, has supper with the farm family and says he'll take a shortcut through the woods to get home. The farmer admonishes him not to do that (the girl's been forbidden and, up to now, has obeyed), but to no avail. There's a bunch of spooky stuff in the woods, at one point the kid's clearly been attacked…and winds up running back to the farm, where he stays overnight.

Most of the plot centers on the mystery of the woods and the red house therein, which is *specifically* forbidden—for good reason, as it turns out. It's partly a psychological mystery dealing with the farmer's deep dark secret. The farmer's even hired a high-school dropout (Rory Calhoun, 25 at the time) to enforce his no-trespassing rule—with gunfire if necessary. The handsome Calhoun and the trampy London…need I say more? All ends well…although in this case "well" includes a couple of deaths.

Defects: Distorted music (unfortunate, since it's a Rozsa score) and sometimes distorted soundtrack. Pluses: Not a poverty-row picture; this is from United Artists and stars Edward G. Robinson as the farmer and a strong cast in general. Also, it's quite well done, with a moderately complex and ultimately satisfying plotline. Given the distortion problems, I come up with $1.50.

Tomorrow at Seven, 1933, b&w. Ray Enright (dir.), Chester Morris, Vivienne Osborne, Frank McHugh, Allen Jenkins, Henry Stephenson. 1:02.

> This is one of those odd mystery/romance/screwball movies, with the screwball mostly being two Chicago cops, both useless, one speaking in wholly arcane supposed cop slang. The theme here is a killer who sends people Aces of Spades warning of their impending doom, then kills them with a sharp instrument. A crime novelist planning to write a book on this fiend is on his way to visit a gentleman who seems to be an authority (and in the process "meets cute" with the authority's secretary's daughter).
>
> As this mess proceeds, we have every reason to believe the novelist might *be* the murderer (he's clearly in cahoots with somebody, for example)…but he's so *cute* that he doesn't fit the scenario. Gee, who else could it be? Four deaths later—including the villain, after a fight sequence—we know.
>
> I'm torn. It's fast moving, some of the characters are interesting, and all in all I enjoyed it. But the cops are really overdone, there are some glaring holes in the narrative (e.g., after a phony coroner shows up to examine a body, the real coroner shows—with police supposedly in tow—and, after he establishes his bona fides, that's it: Nothing more is heard from him or from the cops). I guess it averages out to $1.00.

Disc 35

Dishonored Lady, 1947, b&w. Robert Stevenson (dir.), Hedy Lamarr, Dennis O'Keefe, John Loder, William Lundigan, Margaret Hamilton. 1:25.

> Reviewed in May 2008 as part of another set. $1.25.

Whistle Stop, 1946. b&w. Léonide Moguy (dir.), George Raft, Ava Gardner, Victor McLaglen, Tom Conway, Jorja Curtright. 1:25 [1:21]

> Not really a mystery, but an interesting film. A woman (Ava Gardner) who's been a success in Chicago returns to her hometown—a whistle-stop. She still owns a house there to which she returns, greeted by the family she's been renting it to—including the son, who's an old flame who goes out every night drinking and (small-stakes) gambling and doesn't seem to have a job. (The father's the stationmaster.) There's also the suave and maybe overslick owner of a local bar & grill, who has a thing for the woman—and who doesn't get along *at all* with the son (George Raft). Oh, and the son's supposed to have another girlfriend, who he basically ignores in favor of the woman.
>
> Various plot bits, various arguments, winding up with a botched burglary/murder effort involving the friendly bartender—and a *real* murder that's an attempt to frame the son. Thanks to the bartender

having superhuman abilities of a sort (I won't give away the ending, but it's a trifle implausible), it all works out.

Oddly enough, it's pretty good—even though the chemistry between Raft and Gardner isn't there, Raft's character isn't particularly likable and some of the plot doesn't make a whole lot of sense. A bit missing here and there, but overall I'll give it $1.50.

Dr. Kildare's Strange Case, 1940, b&w. Harold S. Bucquet (dir.), Lew Ayres, Lionel Barrymore, Laraine Day, Shepperd Strudwick, Samuel S. Hinds, Walter Kingsford. 1:17 [1:15].

It's a little tough to approach a 1940 medical mystery with millennial standards. Young Dr. Kildare's brave move to save a patient who's "lost his mind" while surviving a brain surgery that the patient explicitly refused (a different surgeon) by injecting him with a massive dose of insulin in the middle of the night…well, Malpractice City sounds about right. But these were more innocent times.

Good cast. Decent acting. Plots within plots within… It moves right along. Entertaining enough if you don't start wincing. I'll give it $1.25.

Poppies are Also Flowers (or *Las Flores del Diablo*), 1966, color. Terence Young (dir.), Omar Sharif, Senta Berger, Stephen Boyd, Yul Brynner, Angie Dickinson, Rita Hayworth, Trevor Howard, Trini Lopez, E.G. Marshall, Marcello Mastroianni, Anthony Quayle, Eli Wallach, Gilbert Roland, Grace Kelly, Harold Sakata, Hugh Griffith. 1:40 [1:34]

I spotted trouble right at the beginning, with a Serious Woman telling me how Important the drug problem was and how the UN was involved and how so much of it revolved around that innocent little flower with not much smell. Yes, that's right, it's a movie with a message. Also an all-star cast, presumably working for minimal wages because it's a Message. Xerox sponsored it at the UN's request.

Too bad it's also not great. I would go so far as to say that much of it doesn't make any sense, but that might be too strong. There's lots of action, in the Iranian outlands (back when Iran was one of the Good Guys, ruled by a friendly despot), in Monaco, in France, on a cargo ship, on a yacht and finally on a train—but it seemed more helter-skelter than anything else. Maybe the missing six minutes would have helped.

The "color" didn't help. I'm sure it was filmed in color, and sometimes there were some colors in what's on the disc, mostly reds and browns, occasionally—very occasionally—pale greens and deep blues, maybe even once or twice a little yellow. But at times it was pure black-and-white and there was never either a bright color or a proper flesh tone:

Time has not been kind to this flick. Other than the mostly-missing color, the print is *excellent*—full VHS quality.

Even given the earnestness, I can't give it more than a mediocre $1.00.

Disc 36
A typical "sixth disc" with six short movies.

Night Life in Reno, 1931, b&w. Raymond Cannon (dir.), Virginia Valli, Jameson Thomas, Dorothy Christy, Arthur Housman, Dixie Lee, Clarence Wilson, Carmelita Geraghty, Pat O'Malley. 1:12 [0:58]

Here's what the sleeve says: "A woman finds her husband in a compromising position and decides to seek a divorce from him. Heading to Reno to secure a divorce, the woman learns it will take six weeks for her divorce to be granted. Finding she has to wait in Reno for the six weeks, the woman ends up living the wild life and taking up with a married man."

Here's what I saw: The first two sentences are accurate enough, with the divorce attorney being somewhat of a comic character. But then we get a long, slow, languid…sequence where the husband (who's followed her, finds the attorney, and pays him to attempt a reconciliation) is drunk in a casino (where only the swells play and all they play is roulette), hangs out with another stiff, attempts the world's worst pickup and, somehow, winds up drinking with the other stiff's friend and with, well, his wife (under an assumed name). The wild life appears to consist entirely of playing roulette and drinking *way* too much.

In any event, the last ten minutes have all the action—almost enough action for a five-minute short. The wife goes off with the other man, he makes a pass, she deflects it and phones her soon-to-be-ex, she leaves the apartment, the other guy's ex (or soon-to-be-ex?) shows up and plugs the guy. Next morning, the maid arrives, sees the corpse, the cops show up and, given obvious evidence, arrest the heroine. At which point her husband shows up and confesses (falsely). Fortunately (?) as she's released and back in her hotel room, the other woman shows up to kill *her* as well, and since she was about to call someone through a switchboard, cops show up to save the day. The woman and husband reunite and leave Reno, with the attorney doing an odd sort of bit.

Damned if I can tell what this was supposed to be. Badly paced, incredibly slow, with acting seeming mostly to consist of looking one way and then the other…and if that was Reno in 1931, its reputation as a hot town was exaggerated. Maybe the missing 14 minutes make a

big difference, but this one already made 58 minutes seem an eternity. As a period piece, *very* generously $0.75.

Convicts at Large, 1938, b&w. Scott E. Beal & David Friedman (dirs..), Ralph Forbes, Paula Stone, William Royle, John Kelly, George Travell, Charles Brokaw. 0:57.

Two setup plot lines: A prison break on one hand, an architectural office where one architect is clearly moonlighting—when he should be drawing up a basement design for a building, he's busy with plans for his own Happy Home LLC company to build homes that are "scientifically designed" to maximize the happiness of residents—a concept he just can't shut up about (including selling an idea as though it was a going concern). He's also hung up on a local singer, to the dismay of his housemates.

He goes for a walk to escape his housemates' incessant chatter. One escapee grabs him, knocks him out, and takes his clothes. As he wakes up—third plotline—two thugs (one a typical comic thug) from the nightclub where the singer works drive by and toss a bundle of clothing out to what they assume to be the escapee (the nightclub owner paid for the escape). Oh, and in the pocket of the clothes is some money, but the comic thug used badly made counterfeit money instead of real money.

You can almost see how things come together. The architect, wearing the clothes in the bundle, finds himself in front of the nightclub and goes in to get something to eat. He strikes up a conversation with the singer (who, for unclear reasons, is almost immediately taken with him). The thugs and owner—who *have no idea* what the escapee (a jewel thief who's supposed to split a $200,000 haul with them) looks like—decide this guy must be the thief and bring him and the singer back to the Back Room.

Lots more action, the assumption that—when the actual thief shows up—the couple (which is apparently what they are now, an hour after they met) will be killed, and a Happy Ending. Yep: As they're being held in adjacent cells until the architect's sister shows up to clear them, he proposes to her—and she accepts even before he finishes the proposal. All of this within, what, 12 hours of them first meeting?

What it is, is a combination of romantic comedy and farce with some crime thrown in for good measure. (Definitely some farce: When the architect, pretending to be the thief, is drawing a map of where the heist is supposedly hidden, he makes a mistake and asks for an eraser—at which point the dumber thug hands him his pistol. You know: His eraser.) You even get one song on the radio and another song-and-dance number (Paula Stone has a good voice and did a fine dance routine). Another indication as to its plausibility: When the thugs, the

club owner and the actual thief—all of them *obviously* armed—are digging up the jewels, the other three apparently have no idea at all that the thief could possibly double-cross them. But hey, it's a romp—and not a bad one. Given the length, I'll say $1.00.

Tough to Handle, 1937, b&w. S. Roy Luby (dir.), Frankie Darro, Kane Richmond, Phyllis Fraser, Harry Worth, Betty Burgess, Johnstone White, Burr Caruth, Stanley Price. 1:00 [0:58]

For some of you, "a Frankie Darro flick" may be all that needs to be said, for good or for bad. He's not the East End Kids, but he'd never be my favorite actor either. That said, this wasn't a bad little B/second-feature flick, especially using one trick (more on that later), although it was an odd mix of thriller (not really much mystery), romantic comedy and musical, a lot to pack into 58 frequently slow-moving minutes.

The basic plot (the sleeve copy gets it *entirely wrong*): a nightclub owner is running an Irish Sweepstakes racket—or, rather, he's sort of running it. The racket: Print up phony tickets, sell them, PROFIT. Except that one set of plates accidentally had real sweepstakes numbers instead of impossible ones—and one of them wins. Darro enters (right at the start) as the winner's grandson and a newspaper peddler, who sells his grandfather the "Sweepstakes Extra" that prints all the winning numbers and names—and is surprised as his grandfather (a) says he has a winning ticket (for $16,000) and (b) says the newspaper printed the winner's name as some woman in another state. Naturally, Darro also sells his paper to the nightclub owner/crook—oh, and Darro's sister is a singer dating an investigative reporter. Can you see where this is heading?

I guess there actually is a mystery (in addition to the absurdly bad "drunk" play by a club patron who turns out to be, supposedly, an undercover agent—and who's clearly in cahoots with the bartenders who feed him no-alcohol drinks all day, which makes no sense at all): who's *actually* in charge of the racket? By now, you've probably figured that one out.

Did you know that most modern DVD players can play a DVD at exactly double speed without chipmunk noises? You hear the dialog (or singing) at its original frequency, just twice as fast. That's how I made it through this movie, especially once the musical numbers started. (It also made the absurd fistfights more tolerable.) Given that I watched the 58-minute movie in 45 minutes, it was appropriately paced. For Frankie Darro fans, maybe $0.75.

The President's Mystery, 1936, b&w. Phil Rosen (dir.), Henry Wilcoxon, Betty Furness, Sidney Blackmer, Evelyn Brent, Barnett Parker. 1:20 (0:53).

The setup (accounting for the title) is unusual: Supposedly, Franklin Delano Roosevelt loved mystery stories and wondered how a millionaire could *disappear* (and start a new life)—with his money. Six writers put together a story; this movie is based on that story (and the story is referenced in the film); the lead titles say the proceeds from the story and the screenplay both went to FDR's Warm Springs Foundation.

That said, it's very much a movie of its time, in the heart of the depression—when, at least according to this flick, predatory businessmen were shutting down competition and refusing to grow and employ people because it might cut into profits. They were also sending hotshot lawyers to Washington to assure that bills to ease credit and reopen factories wouldn't pass. The hotshot lawyer in this case also loves fishing and has a loveless marriage, and goes fishing in a town that's essentially shutting down because the local cannery went under. The owner of the bankrupt cannery is a beautiful young woman (Betty Furness) who feeds the town using illegal fishing methods (actually, her father owned the cannery and committed suicide when it went under).

You can probably guess where this all leads. A combination of Message film, love story and good old American (cooperative) save-yourself knowhow, it's a pretty good story for a one-hour flick. I do wonder about the missing 27 minutes (the first IMDB review suggests that it's all exposition, setting up the lawyer's method for "losing" his money without losing it). I'll give it $1.25.

Racing Blood, 1936, b&w. Victor Halperin (dir.), Frankie Darro, Kane Richmond, Gladys Blake, Arthur Housman, James Eagles, Matthew Betz, Si Wills, Fred 'Snowflake' Toones. 1:01 [0:55]

What? Another Frankie Darro B flick? Yes—and this one's not too bad. Darro's the kid brother (named Frankie) of a jockey and the proprietress of a horse-themed diner (parents never in evidence); he begs $4.85 from his sister to buy an injured colt about to be shot. (The seller gives him back the $4.85 to go towards hay.) After lots and lots of calendar-pages flying by, the colt's healthy, fast, and will only let the kid ride him. Which he does in a $1,000 race, after scrounging the $100 entry fee from various friends. And, of course, wins—racing against his brother, the favorite, who was deliberately fouled by riders in the employ of a ruthless gambler. Oh, and after that, the kid's naïveté leads to his brother's being barred from racing (don't ask).

One thing leads to another, and we have—in short order—the brother seriously ill and lacking the will to live, the colt being poisoned by the gambler's henchmen (except that they actually poison another horse), the kid being kidnapped and, in a truly bizarre last 10 minutes, the kid conquering all odds (he's shot, he's loaded into an ambulance, he

steals the ambulance and drives off, he can barely stand as he goes to get weighed in…) and winning the Derby. Your suspension of disbelief has to be *really* firmly in place (e.g., since the gambler had already decided to kill the kid so there are no witnesses, *why doesn't he just do that?*). But, hey, for what it is, it isn't bad. Mostly for Darro fans, maybe $1.00

The Shadow: Invisible Avenger (aka *The Invisible Avenger*), 1958, b&w. James Wong How & Ben Parker (dir.), Richard Derr, Mark Daniels, Helen Westcott, Jack Doner, Jeanne Neher, Steve Dano, Dan Mullin. 1:10 [0:57]

I think this is the first of several "The Shadow" flicks I've seen in which The Shadow's mystical powers actually come into play. To wit, with the counsel of his compatriot Jogendra (who seems to be telepathic or at least able to project thoughts), he's able to fade out in the minds of beholders, leaving only a shadow. Jogendra can apparently instantly hypnotize anybody by staring at them, even from across the room, and get them to do anything he chooses, so "disappearing" is no big deal.

The plot? Set in New Orleans, where the deposed president of Santa Cruz (your basic Caribbean nation) is in exile after being overthrown by a dictator—a dictator with lots of hired hands and guns working for him, who fears (correctly) that the president's supporters may overthrow the dictatorship. The hired hands do in a jazz trumpeter who's trying to help the president and who has contacted Lamont Cranston to see whether he can contact The Shadow. And the race is on…

Jogendra on more than one occasion points out that if somebody fires (accurately) at the shadow, Cranston will be just as dead as if he hadn't overused his power—but the only time this comes into play, it's somehow the person *behind* the shadow who dies. Never mind. We have a present in which executions are actually shown on TV—and, of course, all the Hispanics in Santa Cruz speak English. There's a little low-key sort-of romance, a lot of music (some pseudo-jazz, one fairly bizarre misogynistic semi-reggae piece under the opening credits, a little Nawlins stuff), and all turns out well. Except that, given the way things turn out, I don't see that Cranston's/The Shadow's activities really made much difference at all. The flick has the feel of being a clumsily assembled set of serial episodes, with total blackouts between segments. (It was originally intended as a TV pilot.) Oh, and The Shadow's tagline ("Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? Only The Shadow knows. Bwahahahah…") ends with a laugh that would have you think The Shadow is a villain, not a hero. The missing 13 minutes might have helped. But it's not bad: $1.00.

Summing Up

Wow. Six discs, 26 movies, and *not one* worth naming as getting at least $1.75. Two pretty good flicks at $1.50, six decent efforts at $1.25, ten mediocrities at $1—for a total of $20.50 for flicks that are at least mediocre. Plus eight more better-than-awful ones at $0.75, but I note that "charitably" shows up for most of them.

In all, an unusually weak six-pack within the sixty-disc marathon.

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Masthead

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