Cites & Insights

Crawford at Large

Perspective
The Reading Disaster (or Not)

You can hardly have missed the report. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) says that only 47% of Americans read "literature" in 2002—a drop of 7% from 1992. "Those reading any book at all in 2002 fell to 57%, down from 61%," according to Hillel Italie's July 7 AP story. NEA chair Dana Gioia, a poet, called this shocking and "a reason for grave concern."

The report blames the internet, TV and movies. Gioia: "I think what we're seeing is an enormous cultural shift from print media to electronic media, and the unintended consequences of that shift." Fair enough—but I'm not sure I buy this: "We have a lot of functionally literate people who are no longer engaged readers. This isn't a case of 'Johnny Can't Read,' but 'Johnny Won't Read.'"

I'm not sure what Gioia thinks Johnny's doing on the internet. It may not be "engaged" reading, but it sure is reading. By the way, "literature" includes westerns but not philosophy, history, or any nonfiction. "Literature" is poems, plays and narrative fiction. The 18-24 cohort shows the sharpest decline: 60% described themselves as reading "literature" in 1992, but only 43% did so in 2002.

The NEA has an odd way of stating numbers: "In 1992, 76.2 million adults in the United States did not read a book. By 2002, that figure had increased to 89.9 million." Here's another way of stating those facts: In 1992, 113.8 million adults in the United States read at least one book. By 2002, that number had changed to 125.2 million.

The first statement might reasonably be thought of as "a call to arms," as Mitchell Kaplan of the American Booksellers Association says about the NEA survey. The second? It's true that the number of book readers may be growing more slowly than the U.S. population as a whole—but to call that a "drop in reading" oversimplifies a complex situation.

Gioia adds another comment that I find bemusing: "There's a communal aspect to reading that has collapsed and we need to find ways to restore it." A communal aspect to reading, particularly reading book-length narrative? I would have said book reading is one of the most private, solitary pastimes available. But then, I've never been much for book clubs. Maybe I'm doing it wrong?

The study's title is even more dramatic than the oddly stated numbers: *Reading at Risk*. Not "a bunch of young adults aren't reading books, and that's interesting," but *reading itself* is "at risk." The AP story even works in the dramatic fall in book sales in 2003. Remember? Book sales increased slightly in revenue but numbers sold declined—to the tune of one percent. Those few remaining readers in the U.S.—a mere 125 million adults plus some number of younger readers—managed to buy 2.22 *billion* (thousand million, for non-U.S. readers) books.

Inside This Issue

Don Wood forwarded a report to PUBLIB from PW Newsline referring to the "grim state of books and literature." *Grim.* That goes along with reading being "at risk." The *Chronicle of Higher Education* ran a long story with lots of unhappy quotes, including another one from Gioia: "The concerned citizen in search of good news about American literary culture will study the pages of this report in vain." *More people are reading books now than did 10 years ago.* That's good news, given the amount of doom crying there's been about attention spans and lack of interest in reading, even if the *proportion* of book readers has declined slightly. (Yes, I am calling 4% over ten years "slightly," particularly given the increase in other demands for time and attention over that decade.)

The *Chronicle*'s Scott McLemee uses statistical manipulation to make that drop look even worse. He calls it "a decline of 7%"—and it's true that 56.6% is 7% less than 60.9%. He also calls the drop

in literary readers 14% by using the same percentage-of-percentage methodology.

Here's where I think the NEA report goes off the deep end. In crying with alarm about declining literary reading among young readers it says, "Indeed, at the current rate of loss, literary reading as a leisure activity will virtually disappear in half a century." I don't know what to say about an assertion like that. It seems to say that, not only will the percentage of young adults who read literature continue to decline at an arithmetic-percentage rate, but those who *do* read now will stop reading as they get older. The 43% of people now 18 to 24 who read literature will, by the time they're 68 to 74, have abandoned literature altogether, and nobody younger will be reading literature either. (Those kids who love Harry Potter will all have learned better, for example, and stop reading literature as soon as Harry graduates.)

Gioia starts out saying that the NEA "shouldn't try to tell the culture what to do, or not to do." But he certainly wants "the culture" to *do something*. He points out the report's finding of high correlations between reading literature and attending museums, supporting the performing arts, and volunteering for charity organizations. "The decline that we see in reading has not only cultural consequences, but social and civic consequences that are very frightening for a democracy." NEA doesn't want to tell us what to do? "If literary intellectuals—writers, scholars, librarians, book people in general—don't take charge of the situation, our culture will be impoverished. When you look at the figures for young readers, that says to me that we don't have a lot of time."

Librarians Comment

After the cries of alarm from NEA and the *Chronicle*, and various alarmed editorials and columns elsewhere (including a *Newsweek* piece that seems to blame the "decline" in reading on the huge *increase* in number of new book titles published each year), it's been refreshing to see some reactions within the library community. Anne McVea used the subject heading "Logic at Risk" to note that people just might be reading nonfiction, magazines, newspapers—or even listening to audiobooks. "I don't think I'm striking at the heart of literary culture if I read Churchill's memoirs instead of Margaret Atwood." Others also note that nonfiction books show growing circulation.

Miriam Bobkoff cited my citation of Bowker's press release on the growing number of new titles—and that new title growth was greatest in juvenile and *nonfiction* areas (biography, history and religion). "Somebody is reading. Lots of somebodies…"

Finally, there was a thread on the ALA Council list, initiated by Michael Gorman—who thinks "the

NEA is crying 'wolf!' in its report on reading." Gorman notes that the major decline is in reading of "literature" and that poetry and plays (in written form) have always been specialized tastes. (For that matter, isn't reading a play false to the form itself? Aren't plays written to be performed?) Gorman also notes the lack of data to show an *overall* decline in reading—since there's lots of reading outside the book (and especially the literary) market. Karen Schneider notes that *she* reads lots of material on the screen ("articles from many major newspapers) and listens to books. There was more to the thread (which probably continues—I don't habitually track the list and picked up these items from *Library Juice*), including Nann Blaine Hilyard's note that some "narrative nonfiction" *should* count as literature, even though it doesn't as far as ALA is concerned.

Reading at Risk?

Do I believe the NEA report identifies a crisis? Not really. The NEA did not identify a decline in reading. It *may* have identified a decline in the *percentage* of adult Americans who read what the NEA identifies as literature. It's *possible* (but a good deal less certain) that the NEA identified a slight decline in the percentage of adult Americans who read books in a given year. That one's tougher. While 17,000 is generally a large enough sample for statistical accuracy, book reading (and reading in general) is such a wildly varied pastime for most people that a 4% "decline" over ten years may or may not have any significance, and may or may not even be real. (Actually, if the margin of error for the survey was 2%, then the survey shows nothing at all about book reading in general. There's also a broader issue: Is it *possible* to do broadly-representative surveys of well-educated people these days? I know I don't have the time or credulence for phone surveys at all; how about you?) But let's assume for the moment that it is real—not that reading has declined (NEA demonstrated no such thing) but that a slightly smaller percentage of American adults read a book in 2002 than did in 1992.

The possibility that less than half the adult population reads literature each year fails to fill me with dismay. Can anyone identify any period prior to World War II in which a majority of the population of *any* nation read book-length literature each year? (I'm ignorant, so that's a legitimate question, but my sense is that there have been very few periods prior to the last century or so in which more than half the adult population was even literate, much less had the leisure, income, and awareness to read book-length literature on a regular basis.)

I think the NEA's probably wrong to blame the "decline" on television and the movies. Both have

been around for quite a while. By most accounts, TV viewing is declining slightly. But then there's the internet. In 1992, it's fair to assume that most adult Americans spent little or no time on the internet, particularly outside work. By 2002, most Americans were acquainted with it and many—particularly those in the 18-24 age range—were spending a significant amount of leisure time on it. There were also a lot more magazines in 2002 than in 1992 and the widespread acceptance of DVDs had made movie watching at home both more engrossing and more active. Most of us had less *time* at home in 2002 than in 1992, given increased work hours.

The number of hours in a day has not increased. As more of us pay attention to health warnings about losing sleep, the number of *available* hours in a day may have declined slightly. Given the increase in things we want to do—areas to engage our intellects as well as provide pleasure—it's only probable that some of us will devote less time to other areas. It's hard to read a book while you're doing something else; books—and particularly "literature"—don't fit multitasking lifestyles very well.

Most activity on the internet involves reading and writing. Despite my general dislike for reading long text on a screen, I do a lot of it—skimming, perhaps, but still reading. Indirect internet reading—that is, reading longer items that I've printed out—certainly equals a book a month. I read a *lot* of magazines, certainly more than I did ten years ago. Add the newspaper and I'm pretty certain *my* overall reading has increased. Do I take as many books out from the library as I did 10 years ago? Probably not, but *Cites & Insights* is largely to blame for that. I almost never read plays (I'd rather see them performed). I almost never read poetry (and haven't since college). I do read fiction, mostly when traveling, although it's rarely "literary" fiction. I don't claim to be typical in any regard.

Most public libraries in the U.S. show increased usage—and most public libraries do more than check out books, although books (fiction *and* nonfiction) continue to be the heart of good public libraries. Major bookstores are doing just fine, as are many well-run independents. When you're talking about what Amazon does well or badly, it's useful to note Amazon's primary business: Selling books.

The sky has not fallen. I sincerely doubt that America will be a nation of aliterates in 50 years.

Bibs & Blather
What Doesn't Appear

I won't go so far as to say that *Cites & Insights* has an editorial policy, particularly in this wildly experimen-

tal year. If there is such a policy, it's this: I comment on things that I encounter, that interest me, and about which I think I have something useful to say.

Once in a while, though, it may be useful to note some aspects of that overall pseudo-policy. In particular, why is it that something I *do* encounter, that *does* interest me, and that I *might* have something useful to say about doesn't show up in *Cites & Insights*? Say, for example, *The 2003 OCLC Environmental Scan: Pattern Recognition*, which editor Alane Wilson was kind enough to send me in its fancy paperback print form. I've now read the whole thing. I think it's worth reading. I won't be commenting on it in THE LIBRARY STUFF. Why is that?

Let's review the parameters:

➢ **If I don't see it, I can't comment on it**. I don't see most of the print library literature, and as long as I'm working full time that's unlikely to change unless publishers send me complimentary subscriptions. So far, the number of such comps—for publications I don't write for—continues to be zero.

➢ **If it's wildly out of scope, I won't comment on it.** The definition of "out of scope" keeps changing, to be sure. I'd consider most (but not all) aspects of cataloging, collection development, reference services, and children's and youth librarianship to be out of scope. I'm unlikely to comment on professional concerns in medicine, truckdriving, wrestling, agriculture, or basketball—just to name a few—unless I see something that seems to impinge on "the intersections and interactions of libraries, messages, people, media, and technology," to quote the scope definition at http://cites.boisestate.edu.

➢ **If I don't have much to say, I'll only comment on it as part of a thematic cluster.** Most articles that I do read are neither so wonderful that I feel the need to extol their virtues nor so awful that I feel compelled to make fun of them, particularly since I shut down CHEAP SHOTS & COMMENTARY. For those in the middle, there needs to be a hook: Something I want to say or some reason I'd like to call attention to the article, commentary, or whatever. Such hooks can be quirky—this is, after all, a zine, not a journal. Thematic clusters (copyright, censorware, library access to scholarship, ebooks/etext…) follow different rules.

➢ **I'm not entirely self-destructive.** If RLG produces something that I regard as ludicrous (which hasn't happened so far), I'd probably remain silent on the issue. If academic library directors produce articles or

commentaries that require negative comment, I'm likely to be careful to phrase the comment so that it can't be taken as an attack on the person.

➢ **I'd rather not be accused of sour grapes.** I'm *also* unlikely to attack an OCLC publication head-on (fortunately, OCLC doesn't generally produce ludicrous stuff either)—and, once I've given up on a person (which doesn't happen often: five to date), I'll simply ignore them here rather than engaging in repeated attacks or defenses.

➢ **Sometimes it just doesn't gel—or I wait too long.** Here's the final escape clause, the one that leads me to write thousands of words that never appear in *Cites & Insights* or elsewhere. If a commentary gets held over more than a few months, for space reasons or otherwise, I may decide it's just not worth mentioning. More frequently, I start to do a GOOD STUFF or LIBRARY STUFF or thematic commentary—and I can't make it coherent enough to meet even my low standards.

That latter reason accounts for the absence of commentary on *The 2003 OCLC Environmental Scan*. I found it interesting, enough so that I read the whole 147-page book. I have positive and negative comments, both about the design and the text. But the few negative comments have a sour-grapes feel to them and, overall, I couldn't put together a coherent commentary. So I'll let it go at this: It's an ambitious effort that's worth reading.

By the way, Nancy Kranich's *The Information Commons: A Public Policy Report*, published by the Free Expression Policy Project and available from www.fepproject.org, is also worth reading—and I *do* expect to comment on it in the next *Cites & Insights*. It's a lot shorter than the OCLC opus, but a little too long for this haphazard month.

So Much for Unanimity

In the July 2004 FEEDBACK & FOLLOWUP, I noted the surprising unanimity of feedback on the marriage essay in *Cites & Insights* 4:7. Since then, I've received one lengthy feedback from a longtime reader, explicitly marked not for publication, which *appears* to break that unanimity. I can't say for certain, since the feedback didn't mention the marriage essay—but the writer did question my claimed expertise in morality, social justice, and human rights.

If the writer had not explicitly labeled the feedback "not for publication," I'd be tempted to run the entire letter. It wouldn't require editing or "[sic]" labels, since it's clearly and intelligently written with no spelling or grammatical errors that I could spot. I

provided a few quick responses to the writer, but might not feel compelled to do so if I published the letter. Nor, of course, would I feel compelled to apologize for commenting on matters of social justice or promise not to do so in the future.

I should thank the letter writer (who, I presume, has quit reading *Cites & Insights*, since they made it clear that they wouldn't choose to read more of my opinions in such areas until I demonstrate my credentials). That feedback convinces me that my subhead ("It may not be my fight, but…") was wrong.

My credentials for offering *opinions* about issues of human rights and social justice are precisely those of anyone who comments on such issues, no more, no less: I'm a human being who has thought about the issues involved and who has such opinions.

A Quick Note on Monetizing

OK, it's summer. No decisions will be made for a while. For the record, the 1% level has yet to be reached…and I'd *love* comments, positive or negative, about the print-on-demand book possibility.

The Censorware Chronicles

The major development is still a work in progress: COPA was sent down by the Supreme Court for the second time. Beyond that, a California congressman introduced a new bill to turn parents (or almost anyone else) into prosecutors—and Mary Minow offered a thoughtful commentary on how libraries should deal with CIPA.

COPA

The Child Online Protection Act (COPA) passed Congress in 1998. That's right: Clinton signed it. With censorship as with strong copyright, party lines don't matter. Briefly, COPA imposes a $50,000 fine and six months in prison for the knowing posting, for commercial purposes, of web content that is "harmful to minors"—unless the company or person doing the posting can demonstrate that they restrict access to such materials to people 17 and older.

As I've been reminded, CIPA was not a direct response to COPA—but COPA *was* a fairly direct response to the Supreme Court overturning Communications Decency Act of 1996. The ACLU and others filed suit for a preliminary injunction against COPA enforcement. The District Court granted that preliminary injunction and the Third Circuit affirmed the injunction based on COPA's use of "community standards" as a basis for determining

the status of material. When the government appealed to the Supreme Court, it remanded the case back to the Third Circuit, saying that the community-standards issue alone did not make the law unconstitutional. The Third Circuit affirmed the injunction a second time on broader grounds, including the assertion that COPA was not the least restrictive means available for the Government to serve its interests. Note that all of these proceedings have to do with enjoining the government from prosecuting COPA cases—not with overturning the law itself. That requires a trial, which has been in abeyance through the two rounds of appeals.

Arguments before the Supreme Court

These arguments took place in early March 2004. Solicitor General Theodore Olsen, arguing to overturn the injunction, used a web search (probably Google) to illustrate the extremity of "online smut." Type in the words "free porn" and you get a list of 6,230,000 websites, he said: "I didn't have time to go all the way through those sites." According to an AP story, Olson called internet porn "persistent and unavoidable" and said the government has a strong interest in shielding teenagers and younger children from it. "There is a compelling government interest in protecting minors from the effects of material that is not obscene by adult standards but that is nonetheless harmful to minors. The Web poses a serious threat to that compelling interest."

Here's where things get interesting and confusing, if you've followed arguments on CIPA. ACLU lawyers argued that other tools are less intrusive—such as filtering software (censorware). So ACLU is arguing in favor of censorware in one case and against it in another? Yes—and that's not necessarily a contradiction. More on that later.

Immediate Commentary

Seth Finkelstein offered two commentaries at his Infothought blog shortly after the Supreme Court arguments. The first one deconstructed Olson's "6,230,000" claim; the second addressed the real difficulty in the anti-COPA argument.

In the first, Finkelstein did "something often unrewarded in this world—*think*.What search did [Olson] do exactly?" Finkelstein assumed that it was the two words "free" and "porn" (without quotes) in Google. He got "about 6,320,000" results the next day, which (as he notes) is "close enough; the total number returned often varies a bit."

But what does that search mean? Not that 6.3 million web pages offer free pornography; not even that 6.3 million contain the phrase "free porn." It means that this many pages apparently have the word "free" somewhere on the page *or in links to the*

page, and also the word "porn" somewhere on the page *or in links to the page*. The AP story from the previous day is one such page (it even has the phrase), as are all the other reports of Olson's testimony—none of which could remotely be considered pornographic. So, to be sure, is Finkelstein's page.

That's not all. Finkelstein started digging into the results "to see if I could find some non-sex-site mentions before the Google 1000 results display limit." (Olson could not have gone all the way through those sites if he had wanted to: Google doesn't allow it.) What happened? He got to the 876th result and got the Google "omitted entries" message. You know the one:

> In order to show you the most relevant results, we have omitted some entries very similar to the 876 already displayed.
>
> If you like, you can repeat the search with the omitted results included.

Trying a couple more times, he got different numbers—but always less than 900. I'm going to quote two paragraphs (separated by other paragraphs) with the note that it wouldn't take much to remove the first word of each paragraph and treat them as arguments deserving as much weight as Olson's "6,230,000" claim:

> Joke: Hear ye! Hear ye! Instead of "**6,230,000 sites available**," there's really uniquely **less than 900**! At least, according to Google.
>
> Humor: If the evidence from a Google search was good enough to be used to justify censorship when it said "6.2 million," why isn't it good enough to justify no censorship if on further investigation it says less than 900? That is, if you thought it was valid before, with a big number, why isn't it valid now, with a small number?

Finkelstein attaches "(garbage in, garbage out)" at the end of that second paragraph—but I think he's made a good case. How much "porn" is actually freely available on the web? *Nobody knows*—and estimates tend to be made by people with heavy stakes in the results. Never mind that many of the 876, or 6.3 million, or some number in between, aren't porn sites at all. Never mind that the definition of "harmful to minors" is either nebulous or, as in COPA and CIPA, extremely difficult to prove.

Finkelstein's second post deals with the problematic nature of ACLU's argument that censorware is better than COPA. The problem is that this argument requires these advocates to speak favorably of censorware—which means they tend to discredit those who say that censorware just plain doesn't work. Which apparently accounts for much of Finkelstein's difficulties before he gave up on censorware investigation. There's strong documentary evidence that Mike Godwin and others did precisely

that: Discourage people from demonstrating how defective censorware is because they saw it as the "intelligent" alternative to COPA and its ilk.

How can I reconcile the ACLU's argument in COPA and ALA's argument against CIPA? One problem with CIPA is that it's a federal *mandate* for censorware—and for a kind of censorware that may or may not exist (censorware that only blocks images and that blocks images in the narrow categories of child pornography, obscenity, and the "harmful to minors" equivalent). Saying that *optional* parental use of censorware at home, using choices that suit the parents, is preferable to heavy-handed legal actions against smut peddlers, isn't inherently at odds with saying that enforced library use of censorware *on all computers used by all ages* is a bad idea. (I've said more than once that I disagree with ALA's absolutist policy on age neutrality. I have no real problem with sufficiently tailored censorware being used in children's areas, or even [and perhaps preferably] children's computers restricted to whitelists of library-approved sites. But when I say "children," I mean a group that certainly ends at an age lower than 17!)

The Decision

The Supreme Court issued its decision on June 29. You should be able to find it easily enough (it's No. 03-218 of the October term, 2003, if that helps). The Supreme Court held that "the third circuit was correct to affirm the District Court's ruling that enforcement of COPA should be enjoined because the statute likely violates the First Amendment."

This ruling does not, in and of itself, strike down COPA, although one might hope the Government wouldn't go to the expense of insisting on an actual trial that's so likely to result in striking down the law. The ruling keeps the anti-enforcement injunction in place. Meanwhile, technically, the six-year-old law is also in place but unenforceable.

The majority ruling does rely on censorware to support its finding that there are less restrictive ways to meet Congress' goal of discouraging minors from gaining access to online "harmful to minors" material. For that matter, censorware could do a *better* job: By estimates cited in the decision, at least 40% of the "free porn" originates outside the U.S. and is immune to COPA—and, presumably, intelligent pornsters would move their servers offshore if COPA was upheld, increasing that percentage.

I'll only cite a few comments from the 15-page opinion signed by Justice Kennedy. "Content-based prohibitions, enforced by severe criminal penalties, have the constant potential to be a repressive force in the lives and thoughts of a free people."

How well would COPA protect minors? Quite apart from the foreign-smut problem, a site can avoid prosecution by requiring use of a credit card, debit account, digital certificate verifying age, or any of a number of other certifications of adulthood. In other words, any kid who wants to look at the nasty stuff need only copy down one of their parents' credit card numbers—and I'd guess that a lot of people under 17 have their *own* credit or debit cards.

Kennedy points out that content-based restrictions on speech must meet a high standard. Even assuming that certain protected speech may be regulated, the court "asks what is the least restrictive alternative that can be used to achieve that goal."

> The purpose of the test is not to consider whether the challenged restriction has some effect in achieving Congress' goal, regardless of the restriction it imposes. The purpose of the test is to ensure that speech is restricted no further than necessary to achieve the goal, for it is important to assure that legitimate speech is not chilled or punished. For that reason, the test does not begin with the status quo of existing regulations, then ask whether the challenged restriction has some additional ability to achieve Congress' legitimate interest. Any restriction on speech could be justified under that analysis. Instead, the court should ask whether the challenged regulation is the least restrictive means among available, effective alternatives.

The First Amendment doesn't actually *say* "The Congress shall only make laws regulating freedom of speech when such laws forward other legitimate government interests." It says something about Congress making *no* laws—but, you know, the Supreme Court doesn't want to slap Congress around just because it ignores the Constitution. Getting back to the decision, Kennedy notes that the Commission on Child Online Protection, a "blue-ribbon commission" created in COPA itself, evaluated different means of restricting minors' ability to gain access to harmful materials on the internet. "It unambiguously found that filters are more effective than age-verification requirements."

Kennedy admits censorware isn't a perfect solution as it both overblocks and underblocks—but the government offered no evidence that COPA would be more effective than filters.

Stevens (Ginsburg joining) adds a concurring opinion noting that COPA's reliance on community standards *should* have been enough to strike it down (he dissented in the earlier case). Stevens goes on to consider just how restrictive COPA actually is, particularly since the burden of proof would be on the defendants: They would have to prove that they had age restrictions in place. Stevens also notes the fuzzy nature of obscene material and the untested new category of "harmful to minors." "Attaching criminal sanctions to a mistaken judgment about the contours of the novel and nebulous category of 'harmful

to minors' speech clearly imposes a heavy burden on the exercise of First Amendment freedoms."

Justice Scalia dissents in a brief opinion that mostly cites his other dissents. He doesn't believe that smut deserves constitutional protection: "Nothing in the First Amendment entitles the type of material covered by COPA to [strict scrutiny]." To Scalia, apparently, smut simply isn't speech, so the First Amendment doesn't apply. Indeed, he states flatly that porn "could, consistent with the First Amendment, be banned entirely." Whew.

Breyer (Chief Justice and Justice O'Connor joining) also dissented, in a statement that's longer than the majority opinion. He asserts that the "harmful to children" category covers "very little more" than legally obscene material, considers the burden imposed by COPA to be "no more than modest," and goes on in some detail about the modified test. As I read Breyer's discussion, one might conclude that there *is* no category—which means that COPA is pointless. That is: Young children normally don't have prurient interests. Material that appeals to the prurient interests of adolescents probably also appeals to such interests for some adults. The third test? "One cannot easily imagine material that has serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value for a significant group of adults, but lacks such value for any significant group of minors." If that's true, then COPA should be struck down as being redundant: Obscenity is *already* illegal. If there's no new category, what's the point?

Breyer also objects to the decision because censorware already existed when Congress passed COPA. Thus, it was part of "the status quo, *i.e.*, the backdrop against which Congress enacted the present statute." He argues against censorware on several other bases—it costs money, it depends on parents' willingness to control their children, and it lacks precision.

Then, late in the dissent, he slips. After consistently suggesting that COPA would only add some tiny amount of "borderline-obscene" material to that which can already be regulated, he says something quite different: COPA "significantly helps to achieve a compelling congressional goal, protecting children from exposure to commercial pornography." Most of which, according to most of the court, is protected by the First Amendment.

A Few Post-decision Commentaries

Andrew Mutch posted a brief report on Web4Lib the day of the decision. He found it interesting that "the majority opinion looked to filtering software as a less-restrictive alternative to achieve the goals of COPA"—and pointed out that the quandary faced by ACLU and ALA affects both sides of the case:

> Having convinced the Court in the ALA case [CIPA] that filters were effective controls on pornographic material, the government suddenly found that argument turned against its arguments in COPA that filters weren't an effective tool to stop children from accessing pornographic web sites. On the flip side, the free speech coalition found itself in the position of arguing that the use of filters by parents and others was a preferred alternative to the restrictions that COPA would have imposed.

Seth Finkelstein cited those comments and provided a little more well-documented history:

> This is actually an extremely old horns-of-dilemma, going back to the original Internet censorship debates in the mid-90's concerning the Communications Decency Act. The politics is often counter-intuitive, quite different from what would naively derive from simple models of censorhip positions.
>
> In fact, when I first decrypted censorware in *1995*, I was specifically asked *not* to publish the results, because the civil-liberties strategy was to argue that censorware works, as part of a legal *and social* campaign...

Tony Mauro offered an analysis at the First Amendment Center Online, noting that COPA *may* return to the Supreme Court once more—"And by the time it looks at the law again, the Supreme Court's composition may have changed." Mauro notes that the language of the majority decision "was heartening to First Amendment advocates." He also quotes Justice's Mark Corallo who was predictably "disappointed" that the Court let the First Amendment get in the way of prosecution:

> Congress has repeatedly attempted to address this serious need and the Court yet again opposed these common-sense measures to protect America's children. The Department will continue to work to defend children from the dangerous predators who lurk in the dark shadows of the World Wide Web.

I like Mauro's reading of Breyer's dissent:

> A frustrated Justice Stephen Breyer, writing in dissent, reviewed the history of the law and asked, "What else was Congress supposed to do?" He said Congress had read the Supreme Court's *Reno* decision [striking down CDA] "with care" and shaped its second legislative effort to respond to its criticisms.

A Supreme Court overwhelmingly sensitive to the Bill of Rights would have a simple answer to Breyer's question: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; *or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press...*" In other words, *give it up*.

Finally, Marjorie Heins published "The right decision; the wrong reason" at the Free Expression Policy Project. She says it's the wrong reason because "the Court endorsed a technology with the potential for far greater censorship than COPA or similar laws—Internet filters."

As to Kennedy's argument that filters are less restrictive than COPA, she agrees in part:

> Filters are less restrictive, in part, because nobody goes to jail for failing to use them. But their use is not always voluntary. [As in CIPA]… And, equally important, filters are notorious for mindless overblocking….

> Equally troubling as its intoxication with filtering technology, the Court majority said not a word about the vagueness and subjectivity of such standards within COPA as "patently offensive" or "serious value."

She discusses that issue in more detail, then notes that Justice Breyer's *dissent* was the only one to address the question of presumed harm from sexual expression, "although he did so unintentionally.

It's a good brief discussion; you'll find it at www.fepproject.org/commentaries/copasctdecsn.html

Parent's Empowerment Act

H.R. 4239, introduced April 28 by California Congressman Duncan Hunter (R), would "provide a civil action for a minor injured by exposure to an entertainment product containing material that is harmful to minors, and for other purposes."

That's what the summary says, but that's not *at all* what the bill says—which should come as no surprise to anyone who's looked at legislation related to either copyright or censorship. You can find the bill on Thomas (start at thomas.loc.gov). What the bill *really* does is to allow a parent—or any other "person acting on behalf of the minor"—to prosecute a civil action in *federal* district court to obtain relief

> against any person who knowingly sells or distributes in interstate or foreign commerce an entertainment product containing material that is harmful to minors, if—

> (1) a reasonable person would expect a substantial number of minors to be exposed to the material; and

> (2) the minor as a result of exposure to that material is likely to suffer personal or emotional injury or injury to mental or moral welfare.

"Relief" means "compensatory damages" to the minor of "not less than $10,000 for each instance of any such material in any such product to which such minor was exposed," as well as punitive damages, a "reasonable attorney's fee (including expert fees)," and "any other appropriate relief."

If the kid's exposed to smut because the parent or guardian has it lying around, there's no case.

The definitions are also interesting—and, I suggest, loose enough that H.R. 4239 would be on the fast track to judicial oblivion if it was ever passed. "Entertainment product" means any medium, from photo to video game to pamphlet to sound recording. "Material that is harmful to minors":

The term "material that is harmful to minors" means any pornographic communication, picture, image, graphic image file, article, recording, writing, or other pornographic matter of any kind that is obscene or that—

(A) the average person, applying the contemporary standards of the adult community in which the minor resides with respect to what is suitable for minors, would find, taking the material as a whole and with respect to minors of the ages that the person reasonably would expect to be exposed to the material—

(i) is designed to appeal to, or is designed to pander to, the prurient interest in nudity, sex, or excretion, with respect to minors; and

(ii) depicts, describes, or represents, in a manner patently offensive with respect to minors, an actual or simulated sexual act or sexual contact, an actual or simulated normal or perverted sexual act, or a lewd exhibition of the genitals or post-pubescent female breast; and

(B) a reasonable person would find, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, and scientific value for minors *sufficient to overcome the pernicious effect of that material*. [Emphasis added]

This bill also defines "minor" as under 18, not 17.

Note the use of community standards—and, even more seriously, the phrase (italicized here) that weakens the "merit" provision of the usual test for obscenity. In essence, this law would be an open invitation for the "Family" organizations or any other group to file massive numbers of civil lawsuits in the most favorable jurisdictions, taking to court Internet service providers, librarians, bookstores, what have you. Unhappy with a juvenile book at the library that includes any vaguely sexual language? Can't get the library to remove it? *Take them to court*—as long as you have a handy juvenile around who finds their "moral welfare" likely to suffer from that nastiness.

Hunter's blatant about it: He wants the bill to "turn parents into prosecuting attorneys fighting a wave of obscenity," according to a post at the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund. But of course it's not obscenity Hunter's on about—it's a much broader area. I'd hope this bill will be laughed out of committee, but I know better than to overestimate the concern of Congress for the First Amendment.

Lawfully Surfing the Net

Minow, Mary, "Lawfully surfing the net: Disabling public library internet filters to avoid more lawsuits in the United States," *First Monday* 9:4 (April 2004). firstmonday.org/issues/issue9_4/minow/

Yes, it's 34 pages long, but that includes ten pages of notes—and Mary Minow is always read-

able. As a librarian and lawyer, she also knows what she's talking about. This article was extremely timely, coming as it did three months before the deadline for CIPA compliance. If you're in a public library and still not sure whether your approach to CIPA is correct (assuming you didn't turn down the e-rates), *read this article.*

That's especially good advice if you've implemented censorware that blocks text as well as images, that doesn't have narrowly-defined categories relating directly to CIPA requirements, or—and this is important—that doesn't have provisions for instant disabling on proof of age.

Minow introduces two libraries with different CIPA implementations:

> Cautious Public Library installs filters and tries to follow the law as written: its policy is to unblock a site when an adult patron asks a librarian to unblock the site for bona fide research. Cautious Public Library will disable the *entire* filter rarely, if ever.

> Quick Public Library also installs filters, choosing a vendor that offers minimum blocking. Its policy allows patrons to sit at a public terminal, and select FILTERED or FILTER DISABLED access, after clicking that they are at least 17 years of age. No librarian intervention is required.

Now, if you've read my "CIPA special" and think that Minow interprets the Supreme Court's actual decision in the same extreme way I did, you know the outcome: Quick Public Library is doing it right, while Cautious Public Library is setting itself up for an "as applied" lawsuit. As this article makes clear, Minow—who, unlike me, *is* a lawyer—does read the decision similarly. I find this heartening. If you're in a library that would just as soon keep the filters operating full time on all the computers, you'd better have a library policy that provides a legal basis for that decision—and you shouldn't be surprised when the local ACLU chapter sues.

I'm not going to summarize or annotate a 24-page article. There's a lot here, including a convenient recap of CIPA's key provisions.

One further note, though. "A quick disabling policy is not only truer to the professional ideals of intellectual freedom, it's also legally safer than the cautious disabling policy." Minow believes that CPL is far more likely to be sued than is QPL, "which in fact bears very little risk of litigation under federal law." As she notes later, six of the nine justices interpreted CIPA to mean that an adult patron "need only request unblocking, and the library *will* do so," without further discussion or investigation of motive. That's not how the law originally read, but "the Supreme Court's interpretation trumps the plain text of a statute." The question of "bona fide research" is also moot: "or other lawful purposes"

means that a patron need only say "I feel like lawfully surfing the Net, and I don't want it filtered."

Perspective
ALA Conference Comments

I don't have a proper set of notes from Orlando. I was part of the LITA Top Technology Trends panel, and anything I added to existing reports on that panel would be superfluous. I wrote up my notes on that and other sessions for work—but there's little in those notes that would be valuable here. As usual, I spent lots of time in the exhibits, met lots of friends and acquaintances who I only see twice a year—and met a few people I know only from email, lists, and weblogs face-to-face for the first time—and found the conference wearying, confusing, and worthwhile. Pretty much par for the course, and Orlando was neither the best nor the worst ALA Annual site I've encountered—although it's closer to the worst (a tie between Dallas and Miami) than the best.

Shortly after the conference, various threads started on both LITA-L and PUBLIB (and probably other that I don't follow) related to Orlando, ALA Annual in general and ALA as an organization. The threads included a fair amount of heat but also more light than I've seen in some similar discussions, particularly when ALA's Mary Ghikas (who is also, full disclosure, a long-time friend) put together a detailed "Response to post-Orlando questions."

I'm not going to go through the posts comment by comment; you can do that yourself if you sign up for LITA-L or PUBLIB. Instead, I'm going to make this a point-counterpoint perspective, with points gleaned from some of the posts and counterpoints reflecting my own thoughts, those of others within the lists, or the ALA "Response" document.

> Counterpoints appear in these smaller-type indented paragraphs normally used for extended quotations.

ALA Expense and Complexity
ALA's dues are too high, particularly if you join all the appropriate divisions and round tables.

> ALA's basic dues are lower than those of most other professional societies—a *lot* lower than many. Indeed, for people making decent money, ALA's dues are lower than several *state* library associations. It's true that ALA divisional dues are higher than typical state association division and section dues; most members choose the one or two divisions that will yield benefits that outweigh the costs.

Conference registration costs too much.

> ALA Annual costs less than many professional conferences, *much* less than most other conferences, and

a number of other conferences charge extra for programs within the general conference. ALA is unquestionably one of the cheaper conferences of its size.

ALA is too big and complex. Maybe it should be an umbrella organization.

Without ALA's size, it's unlikely that the ALA Washington Office could be as effective as it is. Smaller organizations would be less effective at lobbying and marketing. I'm not sure most divisions (other than ACRL and PLA) could survive as independent organizations without huge dues increases.

Why doesn't ALA have more local activities?

The state library associations *are* the "local chapters" of ALA. State associations elect councillors to the ALA council. As was explained in the July 7 memo, ALA tries to avoid competing with state associations when locating its conferences. If ALA had its own local activities, that could (and almost certainly would) be seen as undercutting state associations. Some divisions also have state chapters, some (but not all) of which are also divisions or sections within their state associations, and ALA has student chapters at some library schools.

Conference Complexity and Virtual Participation

ALA Annual has way too many meetings. Why can't it be simpler?

This theme keeps coming up. There have been ALA committees on conference planning and simplification, and various moves to simplify. They've never really worked. Unquestionably, ALA Annual and Midwinter both have a lot of meetings; that's one reason there are relatively few good conference sites.

The problem with "simplification" is that it ignores the reality of ALA and its divisions and round tables. I could name hundreds of groups that are irrelevant *for me*. Those for whom those groups are vital might say that *my* core groups are irrelevant. Yes, there's the often-stated assertion that ALA has so many committees because people want committee appointments to put on their vitas (and to get funding for ALA), but that oversimplifies the situation.

LITA (uniquely) took a major step to reduce possibly needless organizational overhead when it abolished sections and all of the committees that went with them. LITA went further, basing most of the division's activities and organization on *self-organizing* units (LITA Interest Groups)—and adding sunset provisions so that such groups disappear when they're no longer vital. Quite a few LITA Interest Groups have disappeared thanks to the sunset provisions (with two or three asking to be dissolved before the three-year sunset interval was up).

No other division has followed LITA's lead. It's not clear that doing so would meet the needs of their members. If you look at LITA, it still has a fairly large set of subunits. At Orlando, one LITA committee heard concerns that LITA lacked focus in some areas and suggested that converting some Interest Groups to sections might stabilize the situation.

One tongue-in-cheek comment was perfect: "All of the meetings that I don't go to should be cancelled."

Maybe the conference would be simpler if "less important" business was conducted virtually.

ALA groups are trying to find ways to support virtual participation, at least as a way of allowing those who can't come to conferences to have more role in the organization. But there are two problems with converting committees to virtual operation.

First: ALA's open meeting rule. Unless personnel matters or awards are being discussed, ALA meetings cannot be closed. It's important to ALA's organizational ethics that nearly all committee and other meetings are open to observers. It's not clear how that can happen when meetings take place via email.

Second: virtual committee meetings might reduce attendance at ALA and *particularly* at Midwinter. It might not; that's just not clear. But if it did—if converting (say) 500 of the roughly 2,000 meetings and discussions at Midwinter and Annual to virtual meetings resulted in (say) 20% of attendees staying home from Annual and 25% staying home from Midwinter—how would exhibitors react?

As the July 7 memo points out, ALA units have already tried to make things simpler by combining functions. Nine of 11 divisions and 5 of 17 round tables hold "all committee" meetings, where many committees meet simultaneously at tables within a ballroom or other large space. As a result the number of meetings has *declined* in recent years even as ALA membership continues to grow.

Assuming that the problems noted above can be taken care of, who decides what's important? Which committees aren't worth providing rooms for but can't be killed off? Are there discussion groups that should only be allowed to carry on discussions over the internet because they're not important enough for room space? Anyone care to make a list—and defend it in front of those involved in the committees and discussion groups?

Even if meetings take place at the conferences, there needs to be more "outside" participation.

As one person commented, that's a case where people need to act instead of suggesting action. "How about volunteering your time and institution to host an electronic discussion group for an ALA subunit that needs an electronic home?" This year, LITA-L saw more reports from LITA sessions than in recent memory—but there could have been more program reports, the sort of thing the *LITA Newsletter* used to specialize in. There still could be: the list isn't reserved for official reports.

Could conference sessions be made available to those who can't attend? Sure, for a price—but who pays that price? Webcasting is complicated and far from free. People could be "congrunting" or blogging from ALA already, and a few did so. Once again, such actions (unlike formal webcasting) depend on individual action.

ALA contracts to have recordings made of many formal conference programs—formerly audiocassette, now audio CD. The CDs were available on site, but they can also be ordered through ALA. It's

not the same as being there, but the one conference program I've heard on audio CD (because I was on the panel and got a free copy) was crystal-clear. Each CD costs $14; 79 programs were recorded (some using two or three CDs). If you're a true enthusiast, for $885 you get the full 109-CD set!

Yes, greater electronic participation would be good—but it's not easy, and the tradeoffs are difficult. (And, as others have said, there's really no substitute for being there. The programs and other formal sessions I attend at an Annual make up much less than half of Annual's value for me; at Midwinter, the informal values rank even higher.)

How does ALA choose conference sites?

The July 7 paper is, as I write, available on ALA's website (click on Events & Conferences, then go to ALA Annual 2004). It's fascinating and offers much more information on what's involved than I can remember ever seeing in the past—even when I was a division president. What follows is excerpted and paraphrased from that document. Personal interjections are in square brackets and italics.

The key factors for annual are 400,000 gross square feet of exhibit space, 8,500 hotel rooms for peak nights (Friday-Sunday), and 350 *concurrent* meeting rooms within a "workable area."

The first two are fairly straightforward; as one person grumping about ALA's secrecy put it, there are a dozen or more cities with reasonably large conference centers and thousands of hotel rooms. On the other hand, 350 concurrent meeting rooms is "significantly beyond the norm."

Additionally, ALA tries to stay out of the way of "host" state chapters—so, for example, conferences can only be held in Chicago or San Francisco in odd-numbered years because the state conferences are in the same part of the state in even-numbered years.

Other factors considered in selecting sites include accessibility by air and rail, local transportation (in addition to conference shuttles), the number of potential "regional" participants (those within driving range), availability of hotels with varied prices, hotels with enough "double/double" rooms (that is, rooms that can sleep four, which ALA uses more than most conferences), overall meeting costs, convention center technology, and a layout that will handle other needs in addition to exhibits (the ALA store, Placement Center, registration, etc.). "It is important to note that *no* site is all positive or all negative." [*That is, there really aren't any ideal sites for ALA Annual. I certainly can't think of any. Midwinter? I'd call New Orleans and San Antonio almost ideal, with San Antonio the best logistically. New Orleans appears to be off the Midwinter list.*]

The current schedule—subject to change—includes Chicago (2005, 2009), New Orleans (2006,

2011), Washington, DC (2007, 2013), Anaheim (2008, 2012), Orlando (2010), Las Vegas (2014), and San Francisco (2015). New York City may turn up again in the future, and Boston and Philadelphia could become summer sites if hotels and convention centers expand.

Chicago should be better next year: There's a dedicated bus lane between McCormick Place and the primary cluster of hotels or "campus." According to this document, San Francisco wasn't expelled from the list (as some of us thought)—but there were insuperable difficulties for 2007 and 2011, the two earlier dates discussed. Anaheim is new; Las Vegas returns after almost 30 years.

Orlando will be reconsidered—but even now, six years in advance, it could cost ALA more than $170,000 to cancel the contract. Anaheim isn't like Orlando, even if it is a car-oriented "Disney city": more than 4,000 hotel rooms are within easy walking distance of the convention center, connected by sidewalks; the climate's different; and there's good rail service.

Why so many different sites? Because 25% of an average conference's attendance is regional—more than that when you add exhibits-only attendance. There are also regional exhibitors. Midwinter helps bring ALA to even more areas. Midwinter sites include Boston (2005, 2010), San Antonio (2006, 2012), Seattle (2007, 2013), Philadelphia (2008, 2014), Denver (2009) and Chicago (2011, 2015)—and San Diego's being considered for a later date. [*Seattle's new and, I'm guessing, a good possibility. You already know how I feel about Philadelphia in January…*]

ALA can't schedule all 350 rooms in the convention center without paying a fairly large fortune. Convention centers give meeting rooms to conventions abased on the amount of paid exhibit floor space. If more rooms *are* available, they cost much more than they would in hotels. And in places like Washington, DC and San Francisco, "all the convention center meeting rooms" is still only 60 to 80. The rest of the rooms need to be in hotels; the trick is keeping the size of the meeting "campus" reasonable. [*I don't believe it was reasonable in Orlando—and that's not ALA's fault. In fact, 1,419 of 2,298 total sessions were held in the four convenient properties—the convention center, Peabody, Rosen Center, and Rosen Plaza. But that left more than 800 spread over many miles.*]

The conference includes 250 to 300 "tracked" programs and a bunch of other programs, plus 180 or so discussion group/interest group sessions, hundreds of catered events and close to 1,400 other business meetings. Unfortunately, those many meetings tend to get shoved into smaller portions of the conference calendar over time because attendees want to come in late and leave early. So in Orlando,

there were 654 sessions Saturday, 717 Sunday, 437 Monday, and 90 Tuesday.

Annual is expected to contribute around $1.5 million net revenue to ALA, in addition to $1 million in overhead. Exhibits provide roughly half of Annual revenues, registration roughly 25%. The paper also provides some specific expense categories—including $200,000 to $250,000 for shuttle buses.

Orlando

Some people loved Orlando. Some were reminded of ALA in Miami—and that was almost never a fond memory, since Miami was an extremely difficult conference. Some said "It's *always* too spread out," some argued that San Francisco's the only place with good weather, some said 22,000 attendees can't be wrong.

I thought Orlando was better than Miami or Dallas—but not by a lot. I didn't mind the heat (which I expected). I found the humidity drained my energy (but also expected the humidity). I did *not* expect the sheer distances and the pedestrian-hostile nature of International Drive. I did *not* expect the difficulty of finding reasonably priced food within walking distance of the convention center. And I certainly did not expect that, if you asked for a cab (especially to get back from a restaurant), chances are you got some car with a driver who would charge whatever they felt like charging.

Unfortunately for Orlando, the "22,000 attendees" estimate was wrong. According to *Library Journal*'s post-conference report, fewer than 20,000 people attended ALA Annual 2004—the lowest since 1994, except for Toronto. Between 1995 and 2002, attendance ranged from 21,130 (Atlanta in 2002) to 26,542 (San Francisco in 2001), with most conferences having 23,000 to 24,000 attendees. 1994? That was Miami: 12,627, *just over half* the attendance in Chicago the next year.

In Closing

As I was starting to organize this odd perspective, LITA came out with a bombshell of its own: personalized email saying that the Board is raising LITA dues by $15. I never knew that the LITA Board *could* raise dues without a membership vote, and I believe the increase will cement LITA's place as the most expensive division. What do you get for your money, and is it worth it? That's another discussion and I'm not the one to start it.

Feedback Special
Following Up on Ebooks

This isn't a proper ebooks/etext update since it's based on direct and indirect feedback on the last such update. This also isn't a typical FEEDBACK section because I'm including comments on other reports noted in some of the feedback.

Dorothea Salo at *Caveat Lector*

Salo posted a weblog entry June 20 that included kind comments on *Cites & Insights* and summarized the last EBOOKS, ETEXT & POD section as "a quite long and impressive slagging of ebooks (with, it must be said, some grudging admissions of their use in certain areas; Walt Crawford's no blind dogmatist)." Salo understands print book design—she notes a wonderful (awful!) instance in which a library school professor marked down one of her papers for employing the standard (but fading) print-typography convention of not indenting the first paragraph after a heading. (I always shudder a little when I see a magazine or book that doesn't follow this convention; it just looks sloppy. I suspect Salo's going to be unhappy with the oblique heading portion above: Friz Quadrata doesn't have an italic version so Word obliques the text.) But Salo has "cast [her] own lot with electronic text," and expects to work at making such texts better than they are now. Great; we need more good etext designers.

She started off with "fish in barrels," confessing that she didn't understand why I included a squib on a *Michigan Tech Lode* piece that used pop-up books as an example of what we could lose if books moved to ebook form. The answer is simple and explains why I didn't comment on the piece: **Whimsy**. I do that sometimes. I think popup books should dissuade us from adopting ebooks (when they make sense) just as much as romantic horse carriage rides in Central Park should have dissuaded people from adopting automobiles.

Salo offered a longer commentary on my commentary on Paul Mercierca's article from VALA 2004. I'm quoting the post in full (with Salo's explicit permission).

I think Walt Crawford does a bit of rhetorical violence in his summary of one recent conference article (Paul Mercieca, "E-book Acceptance").

The article is about reading class materials onscreen versus in print, that old chestnut that will never go away in my lifetime. I rarely see the print snobs conceding that familiarity with the medium is part of the problem here, that people won't read extended texts onscreen simply because they're not used to it. That, however, will take care of itself in a few decades, so I'm not terribly worried about it.

Crawford trots out the old etext-causes-eyestrain argument, barely noting that it relates to PDFs only. What he *doesn't* say, though the article clearly does, is that students evinced much less eyestrain and general annoyance when presented with a Microsoft Reader text—a text, in other words, *designed for onscreen reading*.

I *know* this seems an obvious conclusion. Design for the medium, improve readability. Ever seen incunabula? They're wretched, from a readability per-

spective, because cut type just doesn't have the same affordances as pen-and-ink, and the first typefaces were slavish imitations of manuscript hands. Once printing got away from needing to look just like manuscripts, readability improved fairly rapidly.

The first onscreen-versus-print usability test I ever read about, though, utterly ignored questions of appropriateness of design to medium, pitting a color print copy of a popular newsmagazine against a *grotty black-and-white* (not even grayscale, if I recall correctly!) *scan-to-PDF*. They crowed mightily on the basis of that stupidly skewed test that onscreen reading would never, ever catch on. I'm deeply suspicious of print-versus-onscreen deathmatches now. I frankly don't believe the speed difference Crawford cites; I want to know how those numbers were arrived at.

I myself cheerfully concede that I read PDFs slowly onscreen. The typical PDF—*Cites and Insights* no exception—isn't designed for that! A well-designed web page, however, reads as quickly (in my admittedly subjective estimation) as print. An MS Reader ebook—well, I admit I get dumped out of immersion because of design flaws (both in MS Reader and books tailored to it); I know much too much about .lit, there's no two ways about that. I used to read decently-designed .lit books on the planes home from Cleveland, however, and they felt pretty much printlike to me.

Nor do I completely buy Jakob Nielsen's line on this subject, as Nielsen's own site demonstrates that he wouldn't know a readable onscreen design if it bit him in tender spots.

(And no, if you're wondering, Crawford won't do an HTML version of *C&I*. I asked. Not only did I ask, I offered to do the conversion and design work for him, being an opportunistic sort of wench who could make good use of the wide exposure such a task would give me. I'm not angry about it—even if I were, I'd have no particular right to be—just disappointed. Though I admit the print-on-demand book idea he's playing with is probably better for him.)

Anyway...at the end of that snippet, Crawford asks peevishly why on earth anyone should make reluctant undergraduates read onscreen. Oh, boy, questions begged! Here are a few of my answers:

 ➢ The material is not available in print, or can't be got at except electronically owing to travel requirements or rarity or fragility or whatever. Libraries and archives haven't been undertaking digitization projects for their health, after all. There honestly is stuff online that can't be got at any other reasonable way. If it's good, relevant stuff—I'd make them read it, sure.

 ➢ If I knew in advance that a student of mine was blind or heavily visually disabled, I would intentionally skew my syllabus toward non-PDF electronic materials for accessibility's sake. It's just the right thing to do. Of *course* I'd also be on the horn to DAISY to see what my options were for print-only materials.

But if the question is "would I force my sighted students to read onscreen so that their blind colleague would have an easier time?" the answer is an unequivocal yes.

 ➢ The material was designed for onscreen perusal such that printing it is lossy. Heavily hyperlinked texts *lose data* when printed. If I expect my students to tool about a bit and click some links, I have no particular compunction about telling them so. I adduce the Cornell Digital Imaging Tutorial as something I'd make students read onscreen.

 ➢ The material is interactive. I'm going to get whacked on this one, I know it, because interactivity is one of the buzzwords that the hypertext folks use, and (to tell the truth) I've not much more use for them than Crawford. (Though I did enjoy *Hamlet on the Holodeck* despite the horrid title. Admittedly, though, I read it in a roleplaying context rather than a purely literary one.) The truth is, though, simple little things like the HTML-form-based quizzes in the Cornell tutorial I just linked are interactive, and they're worthwhile.

 ➢ I am making a point about information literacy, online and off-. How the hell are we supposed to teach our students that they can't believe everything they read anywhere, especially but not entirely online, if we never tell them to read anything online?

Because I am one of those evil e-text proponents, I would assign onscreen reading just to get students familiar with it. I doubt, however, that Crawford would back me on this one, and he's quite within his rights not to.

First a technological aside. This is the first time I've used the OCR functionality on my inexpensive multifunction printer except for a casual test. I didn't expect much, given that the OCR recognition is part of a software suite thrown in with a scanner/copier/printer that cost $150 and does great work. It took me *two minutes,* tops, to clean up the scan (printed in single-column proportional type after downloading as text from *Caveat Lector*). There were *no* errors in the text itself. The time was spent eliminating extra punctuation elements, restoring italics, and changing the styles to *Cites & Insights* standards. I'm impressed.

Now, as to responses—noting that, as I emailed Salo, I didn't think I was "slagging" ebooks. I thought it was, on the whole, a friendly summary. Is reading long texts on-screen simply a matter of getting used to it? I don't believe so, but that's my belief, not proof. Perhaps the next generation's eyes and minds really have mutated enough so they're

comfortable with reading into projected light. I can't prove otherwise.

My comments *did* note that eyestrain occurred when reading PDF documents. If I failed to note that Microsoft Reader text did better, it's because I overlooked it and was trying to keep the summary short. (Here's what the paper says: "The students suggested that [Microsoft Reader format] led to *less* eyestrain than the PDF chapters…" It doesn't say the students weren't annoyed: They *still* preferred print.) I agree that text designed for onscreen reading will work better than crude adaptations from print, or at least that it should. I'm not encouraged by the sheer flood of Arial/Helvetica I see in online applications; I *am* encouraged by how well ClearType works in some cases.

The speed difference I cited was taken directly from the paper. If Salo reads well designed on-screen text as rapidly and with as much retention as she does well-designed print, great. I don't (even on the rare occasions when I see well designed on-screen text), and apparently most people studied to date haven't, but that could change. Since I'm no great fan of Jakob Nielsen and regard his schoolbook-text site as pretty horrendous from a reading perspective, I'm not going to argue with Salo on that one.

Why did I turn down Salo's offer? That's complicated, but there are two primary reasons:

> I don't want to maintain two versions of each issue.

> I *do* care about how *Cites & Insights* looks and how much paper it uses for those who read the lengthy issues in print, and PDF lets me maintain the layout and typography I want. It's not fancy, but it's mine—and it uses paper efficiently.

My whole set of reasons for using PDF is in the *Cites & Insights* FAQ.

I did ask why libraries or universities should force students to read on-screen. As I read the article, the cases considered were pure substitutions of on-screen text for printed text, and I didn't see the point. Dorothea Salo provides six answers to the general question. They are not answers I saw in the original article. *I think they are all good answers*—not to make students convert to ebooks on a general basis, but to use etext in appropriate circumstances, including the circumstance of learning about etext and on-screen readability.

I believe there are quite a few areas in which etext makes sense. I've always said that, even as I've argued against those who believe print books are on their way out in general. Dorothea Salo provides a few specific cases in one specific area. There are many others, to be sure.

John Dupuis: Safari Books in Long-Term Use

I discussed another VALA paper by Wendy Abbott and Kate Kelly, part of which studied the use of 90 ebooks from Safari Books over a two-month period. I wasn't impressed by the fact that 36% of that small collection, which had been selected for its audience, was used over two months by an audience of IT students—surely students who would flock to etext. But I also noted, "these are early days!"—maybe because Safari Books' technology-oriented approach, where people really only want a few pages out of a book, strikes me as one of the most plausible ebook niches.

John Dupuis (York University) offered a longer-term report on York's Safari implementation. He's the computer science & information technology bibliographer; York has five user licenses for 150 Safari titles, and the titles have all been added to York's online catalog. (Er, *catalogue*, since York is a Canadian university.) I'm excerpting here:

Just a few weeks ago my University Librarian asked me for our stats so far after two years… June 2004 has accounted for another 2000 or so page reads in 247 sessions, not bad for a slow month.

Here's what I sent her:

For 2003-2004 (*i.e.*, Sept. 1, 2003 to May 31, 2004), 9 months:

Number of page reads: 29,511. [List of most popular books follows, beginning with *Programming Microsoft .NET* at 1,331 page reads and including 10 other books with more than 500 page reads.]

Total sessions: 3,157.

Average session length: 9 minutes 17 seconds.

Number of rejected session requests: 338.

2,865 successful keyword queries; 143 unsuccessful queries.

The previous year (September 1, 2002 to August 31, 2003) showed slightly fewer page reads, half as many sessions, and roughly the same number of keyword queries.

At my request, Dupuis did a little more investigation and added this information:

Top 10% books represent approximately 34% of hits (10%th book had 465 hits)

Top 20%: 45% (278 hits for 20%th book)

Top 50%: 81% (148 hits for the book at the median point).

This looks more or less like I would expect, given that I tried to balance popularity with general coverage. The advantage, of course, with the Safari model is that this summer I will be able to swap out the underperforming titles that I selected last year and replace them with ones that I hope will be more

used. There are several books that I selected that have a very small number of hits, say under 10.

I'm delighted Dupuis sent this report. In the second year of use, where there are probably fewer accidental hits and more intentional use, it looks as though a typical session involved looking at nine or ten pages of technology books after finding the appropriate pages through keyword searches. That's how these books normally *do* get used: Few people read *Inside Dreamweaver MX* cover to cover! Even assuming that each session involved only one book, that means more than 3,000 uses of 150 books over the course of an academic year; that's success by any measure I'd care to use. Dupuis also seems to have evaded the 80:20 problem (where you'd expect the top 20% of books to represent 80% of use); 148 page views or more for each of *half* of the collection in one year represents wonderfully varied use by academic library standards.

If you're looking for the "but," it's not coming. Safari's model makes sense for that kind of book, and these massive, rapidly changing manuals make more sense for most readers in ebook form. I'm delighted to see it's working in the longer run and hope that Bond University in Australia is doing as well with their Safari ebooks.

Reporting on Ebook Appliance Experiments—and More

Bill Drew extracted my question as to why we haven't heard many results of the grant-funded ebook-appliance experiments in public libraries and posted it to the LITA-L list, adding: "Anybody aware of any reports or anyone willing to tell us the results of these experiments? Are all of these devices not in the local landfill? I do read ebooks by the way. I have several dozen on my PDA. I am currently reading some Star Trek fan fiction."

Ted Koppel (TLC) responded noting an Open E-book Conference in March 2004. "The clear message from *that* meeting was that dedicated hardware devices were all but obsolete, and that the delivery of e-books was clearly pointing to hardware-agnostic, software based control mechanisms (PDF with DRM, one or two other approaches) as opposed to hardware." As to whether the use of ebook appliances justified the grant-money expenditure in libraries: "Several speakers at the March conference made the point that the e-book industry has to have the courage and patience to try a lot of approaches and not be afraid if some of them fail. E-books represent a delivery mechanism in its infancy."

That sounds fine as long as those studies were being funded by the ebook industry. My impression is that (with one or two possible exceptions) that wasn't the case. Getting someone else to spend *their* money to see which of your approaches is worthwhile is certainly a form of market research, but it's not usually one that libraries would be involved in. The last sentence is a golden oldie dating back to the first days of etext more than a decade ago and will continue to be a standing comment until (unless?) ebooks establish themselves. Maybe that's the way it should be.

Phyllis Davis and Mark Beatty:
WPLC Ebook Project

I'm coupling these responses because both point to the Wisconsin Public Library Consortium Ebook Project. Mark (WILS) was up first:

> If you haven't already you might want to check out the reports generated for the Wisconsin Public Library Consortium ebook project. Here's the link to get to all the reports:
>
> http://www.wplc.info/reports/welcome.html
>
> The full Josh Morrill [paper] is quite excellent. The emphasis is on netLibrary because that's what the project realized was the best service to use. But there is also some ebook device (rocket books) information.
>
> [An aside, paraphased, is that some of the library systems might have purchased more ebook appliances—but once Gemstar took over and imposed tight proprietary constraints, they chose not to.]

Phyllis Davis (South Central Library System, Madison) sent email a few days later:

> You can find a report on our ebook grant project (2000-2002) at: [same address]
>
> Your best bet is probably to look at "E-book Project Final Report: Executive Summary." Other reports mounted there might also be of interest. The main thrust of our project was netLibrary, but we looked at REB 1100 readers, too.
>
> I don't think that public libraries who looked at these technologies hid any dirty laundry so much as moved on when it was obvious we had learned what we could and made the decision not to invest further. We are still growing our shared netLibrary collection and it is still getting a lot of use.

I suspect Ms. Davis' comment expresses the reality of most projects (I've only heard from one other one). If I insinuated "dirty laundry," I apologize: It was inadvertent. Notably, Wisconsin's public librarians—a great bunch, as I know from experience—had the smarts to "move on" when the time was right and to avoid sinking more money into a device-and-DRM combination that was so clearly anti-library. NetLibrary is another one of those niches that can make sense for libraries (I've called them "pseudo-books," a description some netLibrary people have agreed with—like Safari Books, cases where you expect the reader to use small portions of a book

rather than reading the whole thing from start to finish). I also suspect that most of the grant money *was* well used; one good use for grants is to carry out experiments that might fail.

I had missed the WPLC project reports, an oversight that I remedied, reading the two-page final report, the seven-page ebook evaluation, and Joshua H. Morrill's *WATF Grant Evaluation Report* (30 pages including 10 pages of appendices). I **recommend** both of them (see address in Mark Beatty's notes).

The portion of the final report discussing experience with ebook appliances is interesting, although it's hard to connect it to the survey evaluation that follows. The report says that 207 completed surveys were received—but the evaluation only seems to involve 87 users, a much smaller number. The report says most people found the readers satisfactory and that over half of those trying readers gave them a 4 or 5 on a five-point "least to most preferred" scale—lower than hardback books but tied with paperback books. That section of the report concludes:

> At this writing, there is considerable concern about the viability of the current generation of portable readers and the number of titles that can be loaded on them. In addition, the current model is expensive and requires specific titles to reside on specific readers, which results in a number of problems for libraries. WPLC members have concluded that while individual members may choose to offer this technology, the consortium will no longer invest in it.

The netLibrary experience was more positive: Over the two-year grant period, 4,138 netLibrary ebooks had been used nearly 31,000 times. In terms of raw circulation, this makes the consortial netLibrary collection three times as popular as the twenty million book and serial volumes held by the libraries in the group. That's a tricky comparison—as the report recognizes—but there's little question that netLibrary was and probably still is working out.

I can only assume that the survey evaluation available on the website is only part of the overall evaluation. Not only does it have 87 rather than 207 users, I find only 31 selecting 4 or 5 for the ebook format, hardly "over half." By comparison, 49 of 87 chose 4 or 5 for paperbacks and *69* of 86 chose 4 or 5 for hardbound books, with 50 choosing 5 ("Most preferred"). Interestingly, most of the responses were from Baby Boomers (44 of 87 were 40 to 55 years old) and 72 of 87 were female.

Morrill's report is *entirely* about netLibrary use and perceptions. It considers 529 survey responses in great detail, and is **well worth studying** if you're looking at netLibrary use. Most people search for specific items when using netLibrary; most dialup users don't believe they'd use netLibrary more with wideband connections or if they had better training; most (74%) think netLibrary is a useful resource—

and slightly over half wanted a larger collection. More than 85% of a smaller focus group say their libraries should continue to fund netLibrary service, find it valuable, and would recommend it to friends; just under half would use it more if they could download the ebooks to their hard drives—but most would *not* use it more if they could use it on a PDA or ebook appliance.

Tom Peters: Rochester and Digital Talking Books

A series of email exchanges began with a misunderstanding. My question about the grant-funded experiments included the note that "They got a lot of publicity when libraries were buying hundreds (thousands?) of REB devices." Peters noted that the Rochester study involved dozens of ebook appliances, "not hundreds or thousands," and said he'd like to know about any grant-funded project that did include such large purchases. I clarified that I was speaking of the *totality* of library experimental ebook projects, not any given project.

That misunderstanding clarified, Tom noted that he really didn't know whether any U.S. libraries are still using dedicated readers, but he does have a "vague sense that more-or-less dedicated reading devices still maintain at least a toehold in several nations. China, Japan, and Australia come to mind, but I haven't been paying close attention." There's certainly still *interest* in ebook appliances in Japan, where the script, reading habits, and love of technology all make for a very different marketplace—thus, Sony's hot new eink-based appliance is a Japanese unit, not currently intended for sale in the U.S.

I had looked at the Rochester site (www.lib. rochester.edu/main/ebooks/) in the past, at one point noting it as a good site for a variety of information on ebooks. I had not, at the time, been able to get Susan Gibbons' "Ebooks: Some concerns and surprises" article, which appeared in *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 1:1 (2001): 71-75. That article is now available and does make interesting reading at a three-year remove. The project involved 30 ebook appliances at six libraries (two SoftBooks and three Rockets at each library).

According to the study, people did *not* report eyestrain as a problem. The main problems had to do with the inflexible nature of the appliances and their downloading and book-purchase methodologies. How hostile were the suppliers? When one vice president of a digital content provider was asked whether it was possible for libraries to circulate his company's digital content, he responded: "No, that would be stealing profits from our company and the authors associated with us."

Gibbons saw Stephen King's *Riding the Bullet* as a turning point for ebooks and said "many more

ebook-only titles are in the works." She noted that in 1999 there were "*only* two portable, dedicated electronic book readers on the market." [Emphasis added for pure irony. Times change.] Her article is **worth reading** as a success story.

The Rochester web site is still there, with survey results and other commentaries.

What about digital talking books? Tom Peters is involved in a project to test some of the dedicated digital talking book devices in the field; details are at http://www.midtb.org. Most of the devices are designed for use by blind and visually impaired users, who now mostly use audiocassettes. Quoting Peters' email, frequently mentioned advantages of digital talking books include:

➤ Better sound quality that does not deteriorate with repeated listening

➤ The ability to speed up the playback without the "chipmunk" effect

➤ Improved portability

➤ No need to flip and/or change audiocassette tapes.

LC's National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) is "actively engaged in developing a dedicated DTB device that it plans to distribute to authenticated blind and visually impaired readers throughout the U.S. Many other developed nations already have launched national DTB programs. As far as I know, most are using specially designed portable CD players."

Karen Schneider asked why *dedicated* players were needed. Tom Peters noted that NLS wanted to move directly from cassette to flash memory, leapfrogging CD technology, and that they need to comply with the Chaffee Amendment, which calls for "specialized formats exclusively for use by blind or other persons with disabilities." There's a large, complicated debate as to whether a specialized device is needed. This is an interesting area, one that will probably pop up in the future.

Closing Comments

Some ebook niches make good sense already. Others *should* succeed if the right designs, devices and rights handling can be developed. Some readers from some generations may take more avidly to "reading from the screen" than others. Dorothea Salo's set of reasons to "make" students read etext offers new light; the reports from Wisconsin and Rochester are interesting. I welcome additional reports.

If you're one of those who believe I'm out to trash all etext and ebook usage, maybe you're having trouble comprehending what you read on the screen. That's never been true. If you believe I'm being inconsistent and won't establish an absolute, firm, un-

bending stance on just exactly where and when ebooks and etext make sense—well, I'm not *quite* old enough yet for that level of settled wisdom. Some day, maybe I'll be sure that I know exactly how things are and always will be, with no room for change, but that day's not here yet. I trust it will be long in coming.

Trends & Quick Takes
What Rot! What, Rot?

"DVD rot." Doesn't that strike fear into the hearts of librarians and viewers? According to Don Labriola's well-researched "DVD rot, or not?" (*PC Magazine* 23:11 (June 22, 2004): 76-77), DVD rot *is* real—but it's exceedingly rare and mostly due to some early manufacturing defects. Yes, a few plants did have quality control problems in the first years of DVDs; no, there don't seem to be many defective discs, and even people raising alarms haven't found problems with any newer discs. The "rot" is aluminum deterioration, which could have several causes—but almost all recent failures come from mishandling. One form of mishandling may happen more with car and portable DVD players: Extreme temperature and humidity changes.

Like CD-Rs, recordable DVDs store data in an entirely different manner than pressed DVDs. They may have problems, but DVD rot isn't one of them.

Tweaking Your TV

It's not a bad idea, even if I'm including this comment for somewhat nefarious reasons. Most TVs are delivered with the contrast and brightness set way too high, yielding an unnatural picture and almost certainly shortening component life. They're set up to be attractive in the showroom; that's probably not the way you want to watch them.

Some DVDs have THX test chapters that let you do simple adjustment of brightness and contrast so you get as wide a range of color and shades as possible. Those chapters are just the beginning. If you get an expensive TV, you should invest a few bucks in a good test DVD so you can get color, brightness, contrast and other settings as good as possible. You'll probably be surprised by the reduction in apparent brightness—but also by the improvement in picture quality. It may be less startling but it will probably be a lot more pleasing. If you have a *good* TV, you might look for a menu option to turn off something called sharpness enhancement or scan velocity modulation or edge enhancement; it adds a false sharpness to images that's also more impressive than real.

Scott Wilkinson goes through a set of basic adjustments using Joe Kane Productions' *Digital Video Essentials* in "Taking control" in the newly-renamed *Stereophile Ultimate AV* June/July 2004—which is "1:1" if you believe the table of contents, "10:6" if you believe the masthead (and the "issue no. 76" in the masthead is repeated in a circled "76" on the spine). Why the discrepancy? This magazine continues *Stereophile Guide to Home Theater,* the last issue of which was 10:5.

Now that the Worst Serials Title Change group is alerted, here's the *real* reason I mention this topic. We have a great TV, albeit pre-HD: a 32" Sony XBR. So I should want to make it even better with this set of tests. I get to the first sentence in the actual setup and testing procedure:

> Connect your DVD player to the display using the best possible link: DVI, component, S-video, or composite (in that order of priority, although if you must use S-video or composite, you're not really serious about video quality).

Earth to Scott Wilkinson: In November 1995, they didn't *make* DVI and component inputs for television sets—not even Sony's top of the line. Until I looked at the back of the set just now, I didn't realize how long we've had it, but it's so good (and cost so much) that we're in no hurry to get rid of it. We seem to be part of that 2% of VCR owners who *immediately* saw the difference between S-VHS and VHS when recording broadcast TV, and wouldn't put up with the loss of picture quality—we didn't buy a VCR until S-VHS came out. So we're not really serious about video quality? Well, you can take your sneering comment and…oh, never mind.

If you *do* have a widescreen TV or any newer TV that you plan to make the most of, it probably *will* have a component input and you *should* use that to connect the DVD player. And yes, you should get a good test DVD and optimize your set. You might even follow Scott Wilkinson's advice, particularly if you're wealthy or nouveau enough to meet his criteria for being serious about video quality.

The Obsolescence of the VCR

"Is it time to retire your trusty VCR?" That's the subhead on Bob Anosko's editorial in the July/August 2004 *Sound & Vision*. For most of that readership, the implied "Yes" answer is right today (I believe, although I haven't acted on that belief). For most others, the question is more a matter of "when" than "whether," assuming people actually record with their VCRs.

Here's a statistical point on the growing obsolescence of VCRs: Five years ago, some 23 million VCRs were sold annually. Last year, that dropped to six million. Estimates are for fewer than five million

this year—and I'm surprised the estimates are that high. Meanwhile, DVD player sales went from four million in 1999 to 22 million in 2003 and an expected 24 million this year—all, I believe, U.S. numbers. A DVD player isn't a full replacement for a VCR *if* you timeshift or take home movies—but a DVD burner or, better yet, a disk video recorder/DVD burner combo, probably is. Some three million standalone DVD burners should be sold this year (in addition to millions of DVD burners in PCs). Some fraction of those will include "TiVo equivalents." It's a sensible package: the hard disk for time shifting and a DVD burner for home movies and the rare show you want to keep. Since every DVD burner is also a DVD player and CD player, the combo offers just about as much convergence as most of us really need.

For libraries, the relevant question is "How long will circulating videocassettes still find an audience?" I have no sure answers, but I doubt that too many people are ready to discard their VCRs just yet (and there seem to be quite a few combo VCR/DVD units on the market, which might explain the remaining VCR sales estimates). VHS is clearly obsolescent, but 87% of U.S. households still have a VCR. VHS may not be *obsolete* for another ten years, with five years perhaps a more reasonable horizon for library circulation. More than half of U.S. households now have at least one DVD player. Those numbers certainly justify continued purchase of high-interest videocassettes, but not for too much longer.

Quicker Takes

I'm not sure why this bothers me so much, but it does. A table on p. 36 of the June 2004 *Wired Magazine* compares four CD-ripping services. You know: It's just *so much bother* to rip CDs yourself, so you ship them all to one of these companies. They rip, tag, and load them onto a DVD, hard drive, or (in some cases) MP3 player or one or more CD-Rs. Then they ship back the CDs and the ripped compilation. Cost: $135 to $244 per 100 CDs, including shipping. I may think it's a silly service, but I don't have 2,000 CDs to be ripped. What bothers me are the last two sentences in the brief story:

> Sure, it costs $135 and up for every 100 discs. But you can flip your newly archived CDs at a record store to pay for it.

Beep. Wrong answer. I may not care for the RIAA; I may think labeling personal sharing as "piracy" is absurd. But when you sell CDs while keeping a copy for your own use, that's pretty close to theft—certainly unethical whether it's illegal or not.

➤ I don't think this is a trend, but it's sad. "Cracking the code to romance," a six-page

article in that same *Wired* (12:6, pp. 156-61). "Meet four lonelyhearts who are hacking their way into the sack—call them the dating optimizers." One 33-year-old "single millionaire is "creating a fully searchable database of love" at SocialGrid. Another at Dating Syndicate uses the Friend-of-a-Friend open source protocol to build a "vast, distributed network of love-seekers." A third uses "AIM Sniffer" to sit in a café, spy on instant messaging, and offer his own message when a suitable target—er—potential date is involved. The last is essentially a stalker (that's even the subhead in the article), attempting to show the dangers of dating and networking online. All this sure makes me a lot more interested in Friendster or in actually investigating Orkut instead of being a passive member: Just *look* at who's out there!

➢ Harry McCracken's "blooper reel" accompanying the silly "World Class Awards" in *PC World* includes two noteworthy nonevents. First the Microsoft Smart Display—the portable "tablet" that's essentially tethered to a desktop PC. It started to appear in early 2003. It was expensive, slow, required XP Pro—and nobody could use the desktop if someone was using the tablet. It's gone: Microsoft's dropped the platform. Second, the much acclaimed and oft-delayed OQO ultraportable PC, originally scheduled to ship in 2002 is…well, almost maybe ready to ship any month now, perhaps. Or not.

➢ **Whimsy alert!** I encountered a strange website, www.teemings.com/extras/lotr/. What's there? Huge numbers of brief passages showing what *Lord of the Rings* might be like if someone else had written it. There are *hundreds* of these mini-parodies, perhaps more than a thousand. Some are just dumb. Some are remarkably funny. They're arranged by the would-be author's name, starting with four "Douglas Adams writes *Lord of the Rings*" versions and going on. Herman Melville gets four attempts, as do e.e. cummings, Samuel Beckett, Anthony Burgess, Homer and Robert Frost; some authors get more.

➢ Latest data point in the death of the CD, killed by rampant piracy: CD sales in the first half of 2004 are up 7% compared to 2003. Jupiter Research's Michael Gartenberg now says, "Right now, we're not forecasting the death of the CD anytime soon."

➢ *Wired News* had an odd Daniel Terdiman story on July 8, "Bloggers suffer burnout." Some do, unquestionably—in part, based on this story, because they try to meet too-high expectations. Jason Kottke of *kottke.org* and *remaindered links* says "You start to feel like the readers are depending on you, and…like you have to post something whether you feel like it or not, and that can be depressing." Glenn Reynolds, the A-list *InstaPundit*, says that if he goes more than five or six hours without posting, people start sending him email wondering whether he's OK. The author of *Counterspin Central* just gave it up—as have millions of others, most of whom never really did get their weblogs going. You can build in your own burnout: Markos Moulitsas Zuniga of *Daily Kos* says "I'm always feeling like I'm letting people down if I don't have any new stuff up on the site" and says "I definitely get burnt out." Reynolds adds, "There are times that people want me to have an opinion on stuff that I just don't have an opinion on." None of this is unique to weblogs except sheer currency. Most of us suffer temporary burnout. I take *at least* a week off writing *at least* twice a year, in addition to vacations and speaking trips (where I never write). That's easy with "regular" writing; it's tougher with weblogs. From what I can see, most library bloggers understand this and have avoided the need for daily fodder: Even the Shifted Librarian, librarian.net and Library Stuff disappear for days at a time. Good for them.

PC Progress, January-July 2004

Does this section serve anyone? If so, let me know. As it is, I plan to let *Computer Shopper* lapse next summer and am considering dropping *PC World*—at which point the exercise would be meaningless.

Abbreviations for magazine names (in square brackets): P = *PC Magazine*, W = *PC World*, C = *Computer Shopper*.

Desktop Computers

All-in-one PCs continue to pop up, as this six-unit roundup shows [C24:4]. The units reviewed vary so much in design and functionality that a single Editors' Choice doesn't seem plausible, but there is one: the $2,232 MPC ClientPro, a 2"-thick unit that combines a 17" LCD screen, TV tuner, DVD/CD-RW combo drive, 120GB 7200rpm hard disk, and 2.8GHz Pentium 4 with 512MB RAM. It has a fair

number of ports but the only bundled software is for PVR use and CD/DVD burning.

Intel's "Prescott" Pentium 4 shows up in five PCs reviewed here [C24:5]. All units came with 1GB DDRAM and multiformat DVD burners, Three of the five scored high enough for Editors' Choices. The $2,399 Cyberpower Gamer Infinity 9900 Pro uses a 3.2EGhz Pentium 4, comes with two 120GB hard disks as a RAID 0 combination for maximum speed, an 18" LCD display, ATI Radeon 9800XT Ultra graphics card with 256MB RAM, and a 7.1-channel Creative Labs sound system. It has lots of room for drive expansion (12 drive bays in all!) but six fans make it noisy, "nearly as loud as a small air conditioner." Tied with Cyberpower is Velocity Micro's $3,390 ProMagix, with the same CPU but a different 256MB graphics card (GeForce FX 5950), two 10,000rpm 72GB RAID 0 drives (Cyberpower's drives are typical 7200rpm units) and a 200GB 7200rpm drive for long-term storage, and an 18"-viewable CRT display. The speaker system isn't quite as nice. This unit gets higher speed by overclocking the CPU and graphics card. Just behind those two is Polywell's $2,450 MiniQ Qbox 865T, with a 3.4EGhz Pentium 4, a single 10,000rpm 74GB hard disk, and an ATI All-in-Wonder Radeon 9800 Pro graphics card with 128MB memory. Unlike *all* other tested units, you don't get a second optical drive—but you do get an unusual small, portable chassis.

This roundup offers 14 "PCs for all reasons"—systems to serve the needs of gamers, students, media junkies, or the rest of us [C24:6]. "Entertainment" units turn up two Editors' Choice options, very different systems: Gateway's stereo-shaped $1,799 FMC-901X Family Media Center PC (no display, no speakers, 250GB hard disk, 128MB ATI Radeon 9800 Pro graphics, multiformat DVD burner) and MPC's $2,292 all-in-one PC (with the works built behind and under a 17" LCD, including 120GB disk DVD/CD-RW drive, and 64MB ATI Mobility Radeon 9000 graphics). *All* four gaming/performance systems get Editors' Choice awards; the top two are Falcon Northwest's $4,839 Mach V 3.4 Extreme Edition (1GB DDR, 256MB nVidia GeForce FX 5950 Ultra graphics driving a 18"-viewable CRT, two 120GB drives in RAID 0, multiformat DVD burner, Klipsch 5.1 speaker system) and Polywell's $2,450 MiniQ Qbox 865T with its cute little breadbox CPU—and 1GB DDR, 128MB ATI All-in-Wonder 9800 graphics driving a 17" LCD, multiformat DVD burner, underconfigured 74GB (10,000rpm) disk, and Creative Inspire T5400 5.1-speaker system.

The absolute cheapest systems available—the $399-$499 systems—usually aren't very good values, according to a column in the same issue as this roundup of five "budget" PCs, each costing around $1,000 [C24:7]. Typical tradeoffs at the kilobuck level include last year's fastest CPU, integrated audio rather than a high-end sound card (and usually mediocre speakers), a minitower or midtower case with limited expansion capabilities, and most likely integrated graphics. Editors' Choice is the Gateway eMachines T3085: $968 (after rebate) for an Athlon XP-3000+ CPU, 512MB DDR RAM, a 160GB 7,200 RPM hard disk (much larger than typical at this price), multiformat 4x DVD burner and separate CD-ROM drive, Windows XP home edition, and a 15" LCD display.

Digital Cameras and Software

This *Consumer Reports* roundup (69:5) covers the whole digital photography chain: Cameras, scanners, software, printers—and off-brand printer cartridges (noted in an earlier TRENDS & QUICK TAKES item). There are too many camera recommendations to summarize (only one CR Best Buy, the 3mp $205 Kodak EasyShare CX6330, but it's the sixth-highest-rated 3MP camera). The same is true for scanners, where the single CR Best Buy is the astonishingly inexpensive 600dpi Canon CanoScan LiDE 20 ($50) and the top-rated unit overall is Canon's $130 1200dpi CanoScan 3200F. For photo software, they like Microsoft's program's best—the $50 Picture It! Photo Premium 9.0 among basic programs, the $130 Digital Image Suite 9 for ambitious photographers. Finally, Canon's $150 PhotoPrinter i860 scored highest of regular inkjet printers (HP's $100 PSC 1210 was tops among multifunction units), but shares CR Best Buy honors with the multifunction HP and the lower-rated $80 HP DeskJet 3820 and $100 Epson Stylus C84.

PC Magazine's biggest camera roundup in a while includes 21 cameras (costing $350 to $1,800) grouped in three ranges [P23:5]. All 21 have autofocus, macro settings, exposure compensation, selectable ISO equivalencies and automatic white balance. All but one (a pro model) have built-in flash; all but one either include or accommodate a zoom lens; and all but two use rechargeable batteries. Among shirt-pocket models, Editors' Choice goes to the $550 Sony Cyber-shot DSC-T1, a 5 megapixel unit with 3X optical zoom in a 3.6x2.4x0.8" 6.3oz. package; it lacks an optical viewfinder but has an unusually large 2.5" LCD screen. The review calls it the "sexiest, highest-resolution subcompact camera," although real resolution was closer to a 4mp unit. Moving up to midrange models, which look and feel more like film cameras, Editors' Choice is the $700 Olympus C-5060 Wide Zoom. At 4.6x2.6x3.4" and 17.9oz, it's a much bigger camera and likely to be

much more familiar to film photographers. It's also 5MP and has 4x optical zoom; the review calls it a highly satisfactory camera for a serious photographer not quite ready for a digital SLR. Finally there are the professional models, several of them true digital SLRs, some using interchangeable lenses. Editors' Choice goes to the most expensive, the $1,800 Olympus E-1, even though it has lower resolution (5MP) than some others. It's built like a tank and is the first of a new group of "Four Thirds" cameras that allow interchange of lenses among cameras from different manufacturers—Fuji, Kodak, and Olympus. You don't get a lens for $1,800, just a body.

PC Magazine follows its roundup of higher-end digital cameras with a four-part roundup of photo management, sharing, and printing software and services [P23:5]. This roundup does *not* include photo-editing software. Adobe Photoshop Album 2.0 ($50) earns Editors' Choice honors for photo management, SmugMug ($30 a year) gets the nod as a photo-sharing service and Shutterfly earns the Editors' Choice among photo-printing services.

This mini-roundup [P23:9] includes five eight-megapixel cameras, priced from $999 to $1,100. All have metal bodies, extended (but noninterchangeable) zoom lenses, electronic eye-level viewfinders, hot shoes for strobes, pop-up flashes, and the ability to store images in RAW format (that is, without any compression). While the magazine still recommends a true digital SLR (with replaceable lenses) for ultimate image quality, these are about as good as point-and-shoot cameras get. Two of five earn Editors' Choices: the $1,100 Konica Minolta DiMage A2 with exceptional functions and excellent handling characteristics—including a *movable* eye-level viewfinder—and the $1,000 Olympus C-8080 Wide Zoom, with great image quality and loads of features. Both have that slightly oddball "half a camera" look of other high-end digitals: They look like SLRs with a bulge on one side of the lens and almost nothing on the other side.

Another specialized *PC Magazine* roundup covers six "superzooms," 3MP and 4MP cameras with at least 10x optical zoom and f2.8 lenses. None costs more than $600 or weighs more than 20oz. with batteries; two have image stabilization. Editors' Choice is the $450 Olympus Camedia C-765 Ultra Zoom, a 4MP camera that's smaller than the others (2.4x4.1x2.7", 10.9oz.) and produces the sharpest images in the roundup. The lens range is equivalent to 38mm to 380mm in a 35mm camera.

Digital Camcorders

As you'd expect, digicams continue to get better and cheaper—but they're not converging on a single de-

sign. This roundup [W22:6] includes nine moderately-priced models ($300 to $1,000), which include one that records directly to DVD and another that records to MicroMV, as well as seven using the usual MiniDV. Both of the oddballs come from Sony, and although a Sony unit gets one Best Buy mark, it's a MiniDV unit—the $450 DCR-HC20 MiniDV HandyCam. It's light, small, simple, comfortable, and easy to use, although the video isn't top-notch. For better quality, go for the $980 Panasonic PV-DV953, with strong quality and advanced features. Both include 10x optical zoom, both get around 2 hours battery life; the Panasonic can also take 3MP still pictures. The Sony weighs just under a pound, the Panasonic just under two pounds.

Displays

Big LCD screens keep getting more affordable, although "cheaper" may not yet be an appropriate term. This roundup [W22:3] covers 19" and 17" displays, as usual offering comparisons only for the five best scoring in each category. Highest-rated among the 19" units (and the single Best Buy) is the $679 Dell UltraSharp 1901FP. Image quality isn't as good as three of the others (Sharp's $699 LL-T19D1 and Cornea's $650 CT1904 both do better on graphics, Princeton Digital's $699 SENergy 914 shows better text), and the Sharp earns an equal four-star rating—but it's *PC World*, so there can only be one Best Buy. The Dell does have better features and scores higher on ease of use. Oddly, the $750 Sony SDM-X93, although achieving precisely the same numerical rating as the Sharp, gets a mere 3.5 stars. Dell also gets honors in the 17" class for its $529 UltraSharp 1703—although Samsung's $630 SyncMaster 173P offers better images for both graphics and text.

Another roundup covers 15 current LCD displays ranging from a $329 15" Samsung to a $769 19" unit from Planar Systems—and includes three 17" displays with TV tuners included. The story is as hyperbolic as usual ("With LCD monitors priced so reasonably, is there any reason to endure that flickering desk hog a moment longer?") and there's the usual unsubstantiated claim of reduced eyestrain. No Editors' Choice awards because no display reached the magic 8.0 level but it's worth noting the highest ratings. IBM's $399 ThinkVision L150p (15") tied with Dell's $679 UltraSharp 1901FP (19") at 7.8, but neither is flawless. IBM's budget unit won't pivot and IBM has a remarkably poor dead-pixel replacement policy (there have to be at least 11 nonadjacent malfunctioning pixels). Dell's high-end unit doesn't do well with small text and gray scale shows greenish tint.

Keyboards and Mice

This roundup [P23:2] looks at Bluetooth wireless keyboard/mouse combinations, high-end wireless mice, low-priced combinations, ergonomic keyboards, and mice and keyboards specifically designed for travel. Editors' Choices include the $250 Logitech diNovo Media Desktop Bluetooth combination, the snazziest keyboard around; Microsoft's $60 Wireless IntelliMouse Explorer (in black leather, yet!); Kinesis' $149 Maxim Adjustable Ergonomic Keyboard, an extremely adjustable device; and Microsoft's $100 Wireless Optical Desktop Pro, which includes a Natural-equivalent keyboard.

This roundup [W22:6] includes eight wireless devices and yields three Best Buys: Logitech's $50 Cordless Click Plus Optical Mouse, Logitech's $250 diNovo Media Desktop as a Bluetooth combo, and Microsoft's $65 Basic Wireless Optical Desktop as a wireless combo. Note the agreement on the high style (and high-priced!) DiNovo.

Notebook Computers

Notebooks will probably always be more expensive than comparably configured desktops, but prices and configurations continue to improve. This roundup covers five budget notebooks, none costing more than $1,100 [P23:10]. Two units earn Editors' Choices. The $1,099 Compaq Presario R3000Z from HP comes with an Athlon XP-M 3000+, 256MB DDR SDRAM, 40GB hard disk, 15" XGA display driven by nVidia GeForce4 420 graphics (32MB dedicated display RAM), DVD/CD-RW drive, 802.11g wireless, and Windows XP home edition. It's intended as a desktop replacement, weighing 7.8lb.; battery life was 3 hours 24 minutes. The $999 Averatec AV3225HS is lighter (4.5 pounds) and only an inch thick; it's smallish (11.2x9.6") but has a 12.1" XGA display (integrated VIA S3G graphics). The Athlon XP-M 2000+ CPU drives 512MB DDR SDRAM; there's a 40GB hard disk, DVD/CD-RW combo, 802.11g wireless, and XP Home. Battery life was 2 hours 53 minutes.

Intel's mobile Pentium is better than ever, according to this roundup of six "Dothan" notebooks [P23:11]. The new CPUs draw less power than their predecessors and offer better performance. Editors' Choice is the $2,499 Acer TravelMate 8000, a 6.6lb. portable with 512MB DDR SDRAM, 60GB 7200rpm hard disk (bigger and faster than most notebook drives), multiplatform DVD burner, ATI Mobility Radeon 9700 graphics and 128MB dedicated graphics RAM driving a 15" "UXGA" (2048x1536) screen, both 811.B and 811.G support. Battery life was 5 hours 12 minutes, impressive for a fully-configured notebook. One oddity: the keyboard is in a slight curve, vaguely similar to a Microsoft Natural keyboard but without the divide.

Media Hubs

This roundup [P23:9] includes ten products with a "confusing assortment of features" that do a range of things. Almost all feed MP3 music to your PC (most also handle other audio formats, sometimes including the supposedly lossless FLAC and definitely-lossless WAV), most play videos but not DVDs, some will show slideshows, some handle streaming internet radio. The review is definitely aimed at early adopters, given the confusion in this space—and the likelihood that these features will show up within DVD players and other devices. "But we say, why wait? You've got all that wonderful digital media—and now you can enjoy it more fully, in more places, right now."

Two devices earn Editors' Choices. Creative Labs Sound Blaster Wireless Music costs $200 and comes with a remote that has a 2.5" display. About all it does is play music, but it seems to do that fairly well. The same price gets the other Editors' Choice, Voyetra's Turtle Beach AudioTron AT-100, which serves as a wired-Ethernet music hub and can handle "rights-managed music," that is, files with digital restriction management…but not AAC. It also handles internet radio. The reviewers didn't find any video hubs that worked well enough to recommend.

Then there's Bill Howard's column in the same issue: "Media hubs: Not ready for prime time." He offers a range of reasons you might *not* want to buy a media hub—although he's one of the authors of the review article. When this technophile is cautious about acquiring a new technology, that's a *serious* warning sign.

Optical Drives and Software

If you're in a serious hurry to burn DVD-Rs or DVD+Rs, the wait's gotten shorter. This "first looks" roundup [P23:3] covers three internal burners costing $200 to $250 (and one $300 external drive), all rated at 8x DVD speed using DVD+R media, 4x for DVD-R. Three of four drives earn four-dot ratings, but for unclear reasons only the $300 Plextor PX-708UF and $250 TDK 8X Indi DVD Multiformat Burner earn Editors' Choice seals. Sony's $220 DRU-530A Dual RW drive seems like another good choice; the major differences are bundled software.

This roundup includes both high-speed DVD burners and software suites to support them [W22:4]. Top honors among drives go to the $200 Plextor PX-708A, speediest overall and able to write some brands of 4X DVD+R media at 8X (it comes

with Roxio software) and $180 Lite-On LDW-811S, with the same capabilities and just a trifle slower—although the software (from Sonic) is slightly outdated. Both write all forms of DVD except DVD-RAM, both claim 4X for DVD-R and DVD+RW, 2X for DVD-RW, and 40X for CD-R; in practice, each took a little more than 3 minutes to burn a 700MB CD-R and between 8:20 and 9:11 to write 4.35GB of data to either DVD+R or DVD+RW. Best of the software suites, according to this review, is Ahead's $100 Nero 6 Ultra Edition, which is particularly good for disc copying and CD/DVD mastering.

Two "First Looks" features in the May 23, 2004 *PC Magazine* review new Ulead releases at two levels. The $100 DVD MovieFactory 3 Disc Creator comes out as a "passable" entry-level program in Jan Ozer's review and yields fast rendering times, but Sonic MyDVD is a stronger choice. For pro-level authoring, Ulead's $495 DVD Workshop 2 earns a 4.5-dot rating and Editors' Choice; Ozer says it's well-suited to "everything from simple projects to producing commercial DVD titles."

Personal Video Recording Hardware and Software

Does it make sense to use your PC as a PVR/DVR? In some ways, yes: You already have the box, big hard disks are cheap, and it's all software anyway. Thus, this "first looks" review of three devices to make that possible [P23:7]. Editors' Choice among the three is the $59 SnapStream Beyond TV 3, a software solution that also requires a TV tuner card; it seems to come closer to the "TiVo experience" than the competing products. As with every other test I've seen of such systems done by anyone who cared about quality, the best they can say about video quality is that it's "still shy of dedicated set-top boxes like TiVo." TV tuner cards available for PCs just don't do as well as dedicated tuners or there's some other problem in the PC environment.

Printers

This roundup considers inexpensive laser printers in three categories: monochrome printers costing $200 to $300, color lasers from $500 to $750, and multi-function printers costing $500 (all four units have the same price). Editors' Choice for monochrome printing is Brother's $230 HL-5040, with relatively high (2.9 cents per page) toner costs but a very low price and good performance—but it's worth noting that Panasonic has a *duplexing* laser for $300. Konica's $500 Minolta magicolor 2300W offers high quality for the price. Brother's MFC-8420 earns the award among multifunction units for speed and per-page costs.

This roundup of 17 inkjet printers includes $59 cheapies and a $300 printer using eight ink colors. Three Editors' Choices appear: Canon's $130 i560 Desktop Photo Printer, fast and with good print quality, the $99 Epson Stylus C84, a little slower but with very good quality at a good price (and I believe it uses Epson's DuraBright inks), and the most expensive unit, HP's $300 Photosmart 7960 Photo Printer with its eight inks (in three tanks) and outstanding photo output. A sidebar reviews portable photo printers and gives an Editors' Choice to the $250 Canon i80 Color Bubble Jet Printer.

For workhorse business printers, there's nothing like a network monochrome laser printer; this roundup includes nine of them with rated speeds of 35 to 51 pages per minute, costing $1,377 to $4,060 [P23:7]. The detailed review comes with two Editors' Choices, one for tabloid printing, one for overall quality. The overall winner is somewhat of a surprise: the $1,800 Xerox Phaser 4500DT, a 1200dpi unit that only claims 36 pages per minute but won the speed tests. If you need tabloid capabilities, your best choice is HP's $3,800 9000dn, a good performer that's easy to set up and includes all sorts of paper-handling capabilities.

Color printers aren't as fast, but this roundup shows reasonably good speeds at good prices [W22:5]. Some units cost as little as $800, but the two Best Buys are $1960 and $3550. The cheaper one (with the highest rating) is the Oki Data Oki C7300n, with outstanding text, good color graphics, and reasonable costs for color graphics pages with 5% coverage for each color—around 11 cents, based on *PC World*'s tests. It churned out 19 pages per minute text, almost 3 pages per minute for color graphics. The other Best Buy, HP's Color LaserJet 5500n, costs almost twice as much and prints text a little slower (13.5 ppm), but it's fast on color (5.2ppm), offers better-quality color graphics output, and is the cheapest wide-format printer around. One shocker: A full set of toner cartridges will set you back $1,174 (but cost per 5%-color page is 13 cents: These are very high-capacity cartridges).

Tablet PCs

If this mini-roundup is any indication, the tablet field keeps getting more varied [P23:2]. Editors' Choice is the Toshiba Portégé M205-S809 $2,399 with a 1.5GHz Pentium M, 512MB RAM, 40GB hard disk, DVD/CD-RW combo, 12.1" 1400x1050 resolution screen, and wired and wireless Ethernet, but it's hefty at 4.6 pounds and the high resolution means tiny icons and letters. This is a notebook computer that can be used as a tablet. Acer's $2,299 TravelMate C300 weighs 6.2 pounds, which seems

high for a tablet unit—but it does have a 14.1" screen. Other specs are comparable to the Toshiba.

Utility Software

"Spy stoppers" [P23:4]ffers detailed discussion of the malware problem (spyware, adware, Trojan Horses, and other programs that aren't typically caught by antivirus programs) and steps taken to solve them. For a change, Spybot Search & Destroy did *not* get top honors. It's an honorable mention, just behind SpySweeper 2.2 from Webroot Software, which costs $30 for a one-year subscription. It's called "the most effective standalone tool for detecting, removing, and blocking spyware." One surprising aspect of this review is the sheer proliferation of choices: The review includes 14 programs, three of them portions of Internet security suites.

This "ultimate PC protection guide" [W22:6] covers a relatively small range of programs—only 16 in all. The Best Buy for antivirus scanners is Trend Micro's PC-cillin Internet Security 2004, which caught 93% of overall malware tested and only 76% of Trojan horses, while Symantec Norton Internet Security 2004 had 98% overall and 98% of Trojan horses. Maybe PC-cillin is easier to use, but it strikes me that, barring major disadvantages, the preferred antivirus tool should *always* be the one that blocks and catches the most malware (viruses, worms, Trojan horses, etc.). It's easier to understand the two Best Buys for anti-spyware software—Lavasoft Adaware 6 Plus and Spybot Search & Destroy—because they *do* catch the most spyware, by far. A related article discusses spam filters; Cloudmark SpamNet, a desktop product, did even better than network-based spam filters. (In their tests, it caught 98.2% of spam and only marked 1.6% of legitimate email as spam).

This roundup of internet security suites [C24:7] doesn't award Editors' Choices but does offer detailed discussions of *seven* such suites. Highest rated is Norton Internet Security 2004 ($70); Trend Micro PC-cillin Internet Security 2004 ($50) is a close second although it lacks the strong antispam filter recently added to Norton; eTrust EZ Armor Security Suite 2.0 ($50) comes in third and lacks spam filtering entirely. With any of these suites, you'll also want to add Spybot Search and Destroy 1.2.

PC Values Revisited

I stopped doing quarterly PC VALUES updates in July 2003 because the PC industry had entered an unusually boring period (which continues)—and because the point system no longer made much sense. A year later, I thought I'd see how a July 2004

$1900-$2000 system would compare to the $2,000 Top Power system for July 2003.

Here's the July 2003 computer: Gateway 700X: Pentium 4-2800, 160GB 7200RPM hard disk, 512MB DDR SDRAM, DVD-R/RW/CD-RW burner, 17" LCD display driven by AGP graphics with 128MB graphics RAM (nVidia GeForce4MX or better), V.92 modem and 10/100 Ethernet, brand-name sound card, Boston Acoustics speakers with subwoofer, Microsoft Windows XP Home Edition and Works Suite 2003. At $2,000, it had a value ratio of 3.82.

For July 2004, a preconfigured Gateway 510XL Performance worked out to be a better value than a similarly-configured Dell in the $1,900-$2,000 range. Here's the July 2004 computer: Pentium 4-3000 (3.0GHz) with hyper-threading technology, 160GB 7200RPM hard disk (Serial ATA), 1024MB 400MHz DDR SDRAM, 8x max multiformat DVD burner (that is, both DVD+R/RW and DVD-R/RW, but not DVD-RAM) and second DVD-ROM drive, 17" LCD display driven by 128MB ATI Radeon 9600G (with TV and DVI out), V.92 modem and 10/100 Ethernet, SoundBlaster Audigy 2 audio, house brand speakers with subwoofer, MS Windows XP and Works Suite 2004. At $1,939, it has a value ratio of 4.38—a gain of 15% over a full year.

You gain less than 10% CPU speed, a more flexible DVD burner, and a second DVD drive; there's twice as much RAM; the display card is higher-end. But the speakers probably aren't as good—and overall, it's not much of a change.

It's been *twenty years* since I started doing PC value comparisons, in my very first *Library Hi Tech* article. Enough is enough.

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