Cites & Insights

Crawford at Large

Volume 4, Number 9: July 2004 ISSN 1534-0937 Walt Crawford

Perspective

Good Advice: Making Some Lists

This being the ALA Annual issue, I thought I'd excerpt lists of good advice I've seen on the web. The first subtopic relates directly to ALA and other conferences. The second may be relevant as well, since conferences rely on people giving presentations.

Hints for Making the Most of ALA Conferences

Eli Edwards offered the initial list on April 30 at her weblog, *Confessions of a Mad Librarian*. Here are short versions of her suggestions and others provided in comments on the posting. (I could quote all of this in full since the weblog has a CC BY-NC license, and the full versions are better—but Eli's doing her own compilation for her library school student publication and I don't want to steal her thunder.)

- The ALA event planner is, to some extent, your friend. It is useful if you know exactly what you want to do at conference.
- ALA unit webpages listing programming (for a division or roundtable) are your friends: Unit programming may help you decide which units work for you.
- "Your friends, physical and virtual, within ALA are your friends." Go to programs involving people you know, respect, and admire. If you don't like the program, leave.
- "The conference program book…may not be your friend." It's huge, complicated and a tough way to find and select programming. "However, the maps inside are really useful."
- There's no shame in "following the food" to public receptions.
- *Prioritize*. "There's a lot to do and there probably won't be enough time to do everything you ideally would like to do."
- Try to get all your planned events on one big schedule.

I added my own tip, "based on my failure to do so in early years":

- Don't overschedule. If that event planner is full, you're doing too much. Leave time for exhibits (of course) but also for sightseeing, goofing off, sleep.

Jessamyn (presumably West, the rarin' librarian at librarian.net) offered 11 more suggestions "that sort of interfile with yours." In part and sometimes paraphrased:

- Prioritize—but have backups for every event
- Meals can be for networking or for resting. Know which kind you're signing up for.
- If you're on an expense account, don't assume that others are; choose restaurants accordingly.
- "The free shuttle bus is your friend"—but don't count on it always being timely.
- Mail stuff home or check bags of freebies at the coat check.
- Don't hog the email terminals—and don't count on them being available.
- "You will walk miles every day, you may go hours without eating"—wear comfy shoes, carry water and snacks.
- Figure out what you're interested in early at the conference, highlight items in the conference book's daily schedules, then rip out those pages and leave the heavy book in your room.
- Mix it up: Keynote speakers and small panels, lectures and demos.
- It's easy to move into a leadership role in some of the groups you're sitting in on; think beforehand how much involvement you want.

Inside This Issue

- If you know you'll have to leave a small talk or panel early, let the presenter or chair know in advance, so they don't assume they're boring you silly.

Regarding leadership roles: It may not true for every group and every division, but I can attest that it's *very* easy to become an officer or program planner in a LITA Interest Group if you show the slightest interest in doing so. Being a newbie or lacking credentials won't matter: Good divisions welcome newbies and ALA units operate on the basis of mutual trust.

Mary K. added five more suggestions and seconded the "mail stuff home" suggestion (she notes that Canada Post had an outlet right in the conference center at the ALA/CLA conference; so does USPS at almost every ALA conference):

- Bring a notebook to jot down interesting topics and discussion points.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions in a program. "If you didn't understand something and need it clarified, chances are that someone else feels the same way too." (I'll second that and note that it's a real kindness to speakers. I gave a talk recently in which one key term wasn't clear to many of the attendees; fortunately, someone asked and I had the chance to clarify.)
- Strike up conversations with people in line or waiting for a session.
- "Business cards, business cards, business cards." If you don't have them, you can print your own…
- "Try and travel in packs," particularly in a strange city. Chances are, someone will know something about the city.

All good advice. Do remember to glance at the ads in the conference book as you page through it, before ripping out the maps (and maybe the daily schedules): Those ads help pay for ALA.

Suggestions for Presenters at Library Conferences

Credit Michael Stephens for this; he speaks frequently and posted this on April 23, 2004 at his *Tame the Web: Technology and Libraries* weblog. Again, I'm excerpting or paraphrasing—and I don't see a Creative Commons license on his blog. My own snarky comments are in square brackets.

- **Always be prepared**. Have multiple digital versions of your presentations and a plan if *nothing* works. "Could you do the material cold from your notes and handout?"
- **If it's a track, try to hear the other speakers**. Not only is it respectful but it can improve your talk if you're able to change it on the fly—and it makes the whole track more cohesive.
- **Share!** When there's more than one speaker in a program, keep to your time limits, both so there's time for questions and so later speakers don't get shafted. [I've "done" a 20-minute presentation in a five-minute slot because I was preceded by academics who should know better…and it gets real tiresome. In my experience, those who can't keep to time limits are usually inferior speakers as well.]
- **Have fun!** Librarians aren't that formidable and you shouldn't hide behind your notes.
- **Know your stuff, but there's nothing wrong with "I don't know."** If you're really provoking thought, someone's going to ask a question you can't answer. That's good.
- **Be mindful of acronyms**. See my comment on Mary K's second point in the previous section. "Define, even if you think everyone in the place knows what you are talking about." [Stephens used "At ILF, I offhandedly mentioned RFID…" as an example of this point. One perceptive comment said: "What's ILF?"]
- **There are no stupid questions**. [Well, that's not *entirely* true, but close enough.]
- **Deliver a clear message**. Try to put technological explanations in everyone's terms.
- **Humor works**, but not at anyone's expense except your own.
- **Don't rule out certain conferences**. Why *can't* you speak at ALA? "If you have something good to say, look for ways to say it."
- **It's not ME ME ME**…it's "what can we talk about and learn that will help our library users get to information better, faster and in a way they will recognize the great value of libraries."

Later that day, Karen Schneider added a dozen more items on her non-work weblog, *Free Range Librarian*. Many relate directly to use of technology within the speech: Try to talk directly to the "technology people" beforehand, mention them during the talk, and thank them afterwards. Label your own equipment (cords, etc.). Ask for a lavalier mike. Use their computer rather than your own, given a choice—but bring yours anyway. And "never, ever assume the technology is 'taken care of.'" Check the setup and nudge if necessary. Then there are the following:

- Ask someone to be your timeclock and to give several warnings.
- If you're on a panel with someone going way overtime, "hand them a very large note." [Good advice. Unfortunately, the worst of-

fenders will ignore every note, even someone standing directly in front of them with a TIME'S UP card. Yes, I've seen it happen.]

- There's nothing wrong with appropriate self-promotion, within reason.
- "Wear something nice. However, wear something you've worn before, so you're comfortable in it."
- "Praise your audience." They did have the good taste to choose your session.
- "Consider going post-PowerPoint"—that is, using PowerPoint for visual information and moving beyond it instead of having bullet points for every sentence in your speech. "By all means, do not show up and read from your slides." [Would that every speaker would read and pay attention!] She goes on to note that one good use of PowerPoint is for screen shots as backup if you're using web examples—and the only time I've used PowerPoint since 1989, except for work occasions, was primarily for screenshots.

Thanks, Michael and Karen.

Notes on the Writing Life

Here I'm presented with an ethical quandary. NMRTWRITER is the New Members' Round Table New Writers List (nmrtwriter@ala.org) and it's open to writing librarians in general—I haven't qualified as a "new member" since 1979, but I was welcomed immediately. At times, the list has been deathly quiet. In May 2004, it picked up considerably with threads about writing and weblogs, writing and not writing, how people deal with deadlines, how people deal with possible theft of ideas, and the like.

I printed off ten of the postings to use as background for an essay, then decided it would make more sense to excerpt them here. Most comments are from experienced writers; if nothing else, they make the point that we're all different, with different motivations and different needs. Some of us rely on deadlines; some survive by staying way ahead of deadlines. Some think about writing all the time; some have to force themselves to write at all. Some think blogging is good practice for writing, some don't. Some believe you need to write every day (and think a 1,000-words-a-day target makes sense); some believe big breaks in the process help. Some just love reviewing; some can't hack it.

And that's as much of a set of excerpts as you're going to get—without credit to the first-rate minds that made the comments, I'm afraid. Why? Because NMRTWRITER is a relatively small list and is a community of writers and would-be writers. I think it's OK for me to mention some of the things the community is thinking about, but I don't think it's OK for me to produce a detailed set of notes.

If you think you should be part of the NMRTWRITER community, you can probably find out how to join by going to the NMRT portion of ALA's website, or maybe the "lists portion." Then you can read the archives for yourself.

Bibs & Blather

Top Technology Trends Musings

Orlando will mark the sixth year and 12th conference since a LITA committee invited a group of "trendspotters" to sit around and talk about library-related technology trends worth watching. I'm a little astonished that it's been that long—and that I've been part of the group all that time. People have been added to the group and a few have left. With rare exceptions, you never see all the "trendspotters" at either the informal Midwinter gathering or the increasingly-big-deal Annual panel.

Earlier this year there was some discussion of LITA Top Technology Trends (TTT) on the LITA list and elsewhere. That discussion made me think about the group and my own role. Since those thoughts are ill formed and don't rise to the level of a proper PERSPECTIVE, I'm putting them in BIBS & BLATHER instead.

Who Certifies the Trends?

One discussion thread centered on validation and certification. Were TTT members checking their trends against appropriately authoritative sources? Why should LITA members accept TTT's assurance that these were *the* technology trends?

A few TTT members work in arenas that make them likely to be aware of the most important new issues—but some don't. We read, listen, think, and respond. Some TTT members may vet their ideas with "authoritative" sources; some certainly don't.

The idea of TTT is to raise awareness—*not* to assert that each list is *the* set of important topics.

Why isn't Trend X on the Current List?

The Midwinter list arises quite differently than the Annual one, but in neither case do we sit around reviewing all the old lists and seeing which trends should remain. The old lists all stay on the TTT website and there's no reason to believe that an "old" trend is no longer important. (We have talked about dying trends once in a while, but I don't be-

lieve the group has ever explicitly asked that a previous trend be marked "No longer interesting.")

TTT at Midwinter is a three-hour morning session with continental breakfast, intended primarily for the trendspotters and committee members, decidedly informal and sometimes argumentative. It can't be a closed meeting but visitors are expected to be observers. Ideas and criticisms get tossed back and forth rapidly and frankly throughout the session. Some of us initially expected TTT at Annual to be a shorter version of the same thing, but that's not what it's become (and may not have been the original intent). Instead, it's essentially a panel program, with TTT trendspotters up front and anywhere from 50 to (lately) 600 or more people in the audience. It's even being recorded these days. Given sizable huge audience and shorter time, Annual remarks tend to be more focused and possibly better prepared. There's less time for back-and-forth within the panel—but there's more opportunity for audience interaction. My guess is that blue-sky "trend" possibilities are more likely to arise at Midwinter, and those can be interesting.

The lists are at least partially cumulative. Thinking about this blather (when I still thought it was worth a separate essay), I thought it would be interesting to prepare an alphabetic list of all the trends cited on the TTT website, ignoring chronology. Turns out there is such a list as part of the website itself: "Top technology trends by topic," with dates for each topic. Of 49 topics—listed below—only 10 have been listed more than once, with two of those mentioned three times and one four times.

What about the Makeup of TTT?

What makes these people experts? Why aren't there more women? Why aren't there more NexGen/GenX librarians? If "Why on earth is so-and-so on the group?" was never mentioned, that's probably because librarians tend to be a polite bunch.

I've never been part of the TTT *committee*—the appointed group that invites TTT trendspotters, sets up the discussions, takes notes, distributes and revises the list of trends raised, and prepares resource lists that accompany those trends on the TTT website. They're a hard-working group (not unusual for LITA or any other divisional committees) and deserve credit for keeping this whole odd enterprise going as long and as well as it has.

Should there be more women on TTT? Maybe. Should there be more younger and more technophilic librarians? Maybe.

At which point, of course, I look at the only situation I can directly influence and say, not for the first time: "Why am I still part of this group?" Since there's not a set limit for the group size, my departure wouldn't directly open a spot for someone younger, more technologically hip, or more female, but it would reduce the number of tired old skeptics (possibly to zero)—and that might be a good thing.

By roughly the midpoint between Midwinter and Annual, I had almost decided to make Orlando my swan song, resigning from TTT because I never really was a trendspotter and might be dragging down the level of technological enthusiasm. I took some of the list criticisms personally—*not* because any of them were aimed at me, but because I resembled those remarks. Six years is as long as you can serve on an ALA divisional committee. Maybe that makes sense.

I mentioned that possibility to a few other trendspotters and other acquaintances active in the profession and familiar with TTT. While I can't say resigning from the group is now out of the question, I can say that I've been persuaded to reconsider. The phrase "reality check" came up more than once to describe my role on the group. While serving as a reality check isn't the most comfortable role in the world, it may be a needed role—and it's apparently one that suits me.

As for the rest of TTT—well, I'm guessing that the committee members are open to suggestions. You can find their names on the LITA portion of ALA's website.

The Trends Themselves

So what of the trends identified to date? The website lists them by conference or by topic, with links to suggested sets of resources on each trend and brief commentaries on some topics. Here's the list, in alphabetic order, with my own quick comment in a few cases. Those comments are *only* my own and should be regarded with at least as much skepticism as I apply toward hot new developments. I'm abbreviating dates: "M00" means "ALA Midwinter Meeting 2000," "A03" means "ALA Annual Conference 2003." If these don't make sense to you, go visit the website!

- Authentication [M99]. Still important, not entirely settled yet.
- Automating reference [A00]. "Virtual" and real-time computer-mediated reference is fairly common these days and clearly worthwhile; true "automated" reference is something else entirely.
- Blogging [A03]. Overhyped but worthwhile, both for some libraries and some librarians.
- Broadband [M02].
- Convenience [M01]. Always important, sometimes mildly dangerous.

- Convergence [M00]. I have trouble thinking of this as anything more than a buzzword.
- Co-opting Existing Technologies [M99]. One reason OpenURL works well is that it leverages Z39.50; there are many other examples—but the inclusion discusses *non-library* technologies, sometimes but not always worth adapting or adopting.
- Copyright [A01, M04]. Unbalanced copyright gets in the way of many library technology possibilities.
- Customization/personalization [M99, A00].
- Cyber Infrastructure [A03]
- Digital Rights Management [M04]. Another face of copyright but potentially even more damaging to library possibilities.
- Ebooks [M01]. As revolutionary change, dead. As useful supplements and niche products, growing.
- Evaluation of Internet Sources [M99]
- Game Technology [A02]
- Handhelds [A03]. (I think this is the same as PDAs/Portability)
- Hiring Good Systems Personnel [A01].
- Home Scholars [M99]
- Human Factors [M99]
- Infrared [A02]. Is this currently an interesting technology in libraries, or have various radio systems (WiFi etc.) supplanted it and its line-of-sight limitations entirely?
- Integrated Online Library Systems [A02, M04]. Are these becoming disintegrated—and is that a good thing?
- Internet Use in Libraries [M00]. I'd suggest that this is now part of the infrastructure, like stacks and books.
- Library Catalogs [M01]. Same as Integrated Online Library Systems? Or not?
- Library/Librarian Roles [M00]
- MARC and XML [A00, A03, M04]. Neither one is going away; how do we make the best use of both in common systems?
- Metadata Harvesting [A01]
- Metasearching/New Search Interfaces [M02, A02, M04].
- National Boundaries on the Web [M01]
- Open Source Software [A00, M03]
- OpenURL [A02]. Flourishing, available as open source, vital.
- Partnerships [M00]
- PDAs/Portability of Data [M03].
- Policies and Technology [M04].
- Preservation of New Media Formats [A99]. This one isn't going away, partly because the methods still aren't clear—and new formats continue to proliferate.
- Privacy and Confidentiality [A99]. "See also Customization"—a good note, since the two are directly related.
- Reading Habits (Scanning vs. Reading) [M03].
- RFID [M04].
- Search Engines [A99].
- Security [M02, M03, A03, M04, with the USA PATRIOT Act noted for the last three]. See also authentication and computer vulnerabilities.
- Self-publishing (Amateur fiction) [M02]. Really two different topics. Self-publishing by community members is certainly something for public libraries to be aware of—particularly for *non*fiction.
- Semantic Web [A01]. As a grand solution, I still think it's pixie dust; as a series of small initiatives, there may be some meat here.
- Shop Floor Management [M01]
- Spam Filters [A03]. I know this is radical, but I believe the CAN-SPAM act *has* made a difference.
- Storage and Organization of Mass Data [M02, M03]
- Submerging Technology [M99].
- Trust Management [A00]
- User Centered Design [A02, M04]
- Web Services [M03]
- Web Usability [A00]
- Wireless [A01, M03]

One overall comment seems obvious. Just as we said at the first Midwinter session that you don't have to keep up with everything, it should be clear that you *can't* reasonably keep up with all 49 of these topics—and the ones still to come.

New Possibilities: Reader Suggestions

I've never felt much like a library tech trendspotter. I do have 400+ (or 3,000+) not-so-secret weapons: *Cites & Insights* readers (or, in this case, the subset who subscribe to CITES Alerts). I asked CITES Alerts people for trends *they* thought were worth noting and got some interesting results—some of which will play into my comments at Orlando. I'm summarizing the notes they sent me without personal identification. It's worth noting that some came from a librarian at a large Australian university. Thanks to all who offered suggestions!

- "Blogging is catching on"—including multi-contributor topical blogs such as *STLQ* and *Open Access News*.
- Digital archives may be gaining acceptance after a years-long struggle to convince faculty that they matter.

- DRM affects (plagues?) libraries—for example, making it nearly impossible to circulate some forms of digital resources.
- Ebooks are still developing, but student use of systems such as netLibrary is increasing at some universities.
- Metasearch increases online use, but proprietary products are too expensive. In order for metasearch to flourish, more consistent Z39.50 implementations and metadata standards are needed.
- Open Access publishing and other change in scholarly communication, including online repositories, LOCKSS, etc. The window may be open for a massive shift.
- PDAs have *not* caught on that widely among students in Australia, but almost everyone has a cell phone. At least one university library is trying out SMS (short message service) technology for services such as holds notification.
- RFID is still emerging—in Australia, more in public libraries than in university libraries.
- RSS appears to have growing potential as a way to deliver documents (e.g. government documents). Wisconsin's Legislative Research Bureau, for example, has a list of documents feeds; www.rssgov.com has some information on similar uses.
- Students increasingly use web-based library services and visit the library less often.
- Wireless has taken off over recent years.

Of these, only two or three are new, but several represent worthwhile updates on trends that have appeared previously.

Feedback & Followup

Monetizing the Zine

I can't say I've received loads of responses to the lead essay in *C&I* 4:7, but there has been some feedback. Here's where things stand as of now:

Donations

I received enough positive feedback to set up a PayPal account. Checking Amazon Honor System, I found that they've lowered their fees to equal PayPal, so I also signed up for one of those. They're both in place, directly accessible from either the home page (http://cites.boisestate.edu) or the About page (http://cites.boisestate.edu/about.htm)

I invite donations. I will never demand them.

What role will donations play in determining the future of *Cites & Insights*? I'm not sure, but I could suggest a "10 & 1" rule, to wit:

- If 10% or more of what I believe to be the readership of *Cites & Insights* is donating, more or less annually, at a reasonable average level, then I would *certainly* keep it going as a wholehearted effort. That's enough to replace the standing paid writing gig that's going away and it might encourage me to *not* look hard for a replacement paid assignment, instead spending more time to make *Cites & Insights* as good as possible.
- If less than 1% of that readership donates, that tells me something about how people value—or, rather, *don't* value—*Cites & Insights*, and will probably convince me that it was a bad idea to accept donations. I won't say it would convince me to drop *C&I* because that's not true. It would help define *C&I*'s relative importance compared to other, more remunerative possibilities.

I won't look at percentages until early fall—which is also when I finish the last installment in one standing paid writing arrangement.

Value-Added

One or two people suggested t-shirts or other tchotchkes; others made fun of the idea. A comparison to *Unshelved*'s t-shirts, while charming, has one problem: Bill Barnes has artistic talent; I don't.

The idea that continues to intrigue me is a line of print-on-demand books. If I've calculated the numbers right, then the dividing lines on such books look something like this:

- For a perfect-bound 8.5x11 complete annual volume of *Cites & Insights*, with the same index I post but with full-color covers and on book paper, and assuming a price of $35 to $40, I could justify the modest work required to set up the process if I could project sales of at least 50 to 100 copies for each volume mounted. There's more work involved in volumes prior to 2003 (because of format changes), so 100 copies is almost a minimum for it to make sense. Similarly, if I added value by improving the index (adding page ranges, bolding important discussions of topics and people, fixing the mistakes), the added work increases.
- For thematic 5x8 volumes, running 160 to 250 pages and costing $25 to $30, there would be significant extra work—reformatting the *C&I* portions (or columns and articles from other publications), adding commentary, preparing the overall book. If I could project at least 200 copies, a book would make excellent sense (the economics are *very* different from traditional publish-

ing—I wouldn't be advertising, sending out review copies, maintaining stock, or offering a discount to booksellers). If I projected less than 100 copies, it would be difficult to justify the work.

I obviously need more feedback on these items.

Related Stuff

A number of people either mentioned this essay on their weblogs or sent me mail. Two common themes, other than wishing me luck:

- They're interested in seeing whether this works out at all reasonably. My sense is that there are few success stories in this area.
- Some sent me additional examples of apparent fatigue among the new journalists, or whatever you want to call those who do weblogs, zines, lists, and the like.

The Marriage Essay

While I've received some feedback on the "monetizing" essay, there has been a *lot* on the marriage essay—at least a dozen notes. Most of those notes were from heterosexuals, most of them married. Several of the notes either thanked me or congratulated me for the courage of the essay (which I don't regard as particularly courageous). Every single one of them, without exception, supported my stance on the issue.

That speaks well for my readership. Thank you.

Correction re BioMed Central

In discussing Open Access (specifically in *Cites & Insights* 4:7), I credited several statements to Jan Velterop, director and publisher of BioMed Central. He sent a note to clarify authorship of the statements, particularly those on the myths of OA publishing:

> What you refer to as my statements are in fact a set of unsigned, because collective, BioMed Central statements on the myths propounded by some traditional publishers during and around the UK Parliamentary hearings. Particularly our technical director, Matt Cockerill, ought to be acknowledged. I may have drawn attention to them in various [email list] contributions, which may be why you attribute the statements to me. Doesn't really matter, of course, but I don't want to take credit where it isn't due to me. I do bear responsibility for the statements of course, *qualitate qua*.

The single word change in brackets is to avoid use of a fiercely protected trademark for one particular brand of email list software.

Backchat and Other Feedback

I received several comments on this essay, one of them from Dorothea Salo (who participated in the original discussion). She appreciated the discussion; in some ways, though, her more interesting comment had to do with my notes on LITA. She believes LITA should pay more attention to its student members. She's right, of course: Encouraging LITA membership within library schools would be good for the students and for the future of the division.

The ever-thoughtful Daniel Cornwall also appreciated the backchat piece—"As a frequent presenter at my state's conferences, I want people to take their IRC into the hall and don't mind people leaving quietly"—but also had noteworthy comments on my "Too tired to rip" note, where the quoted person said he tossed all his CD cases in the trash after paying a company to rip them all to MP3:

> He should have checked with his lawyer first. How will he prove to the RIAA's satisfaction that he bought the music he had ripped? That's part, but only part, of the reason I hang onto my CDs (with cases)—so that if I'm ever served by RIAA I can show I own the music. Of course, I don't share, so I don't know why I'd get served. On the other hand, that hasn't stopped the RIAA from trying!

I noted in response that I *do* remove CDs from their cases when those cases are single-width two-CD cases (e.g., Sony's "Essentials" series), storing them instead in the compact multidisc holders that *PC World* used to send on renewal and that you can buy dirt-cheap. That way, I can use the twofer cases for CD-Rs that I burn. But I won't get rid of the CDs, both because it's unethical to sell the CDs and keep the music and because "I might yet want to re-rip at a higher rate/using a different codec/including more of the original." And I was appalled (but not surprised) to see a piece in *Wired Magazine* offering brief reviews of three different ripping services, noting that you'd have to pay more than a buck per CD, but then saying you could get back some of that by "flipping the CDs" at a used record store. Keeping and selling simultaneously: That's a good definition of unethical behavior in the digital age, and *Wired* really should know better.

Nicolas Morin (one of my French readers) offered another perspective on backchat:

> While I mostly agree with your point of view, I thought there might nevertheless be an interesting use of IRC during presentations: If it's not done by someone in the audience who came to listen to the presentation, but by someone from the organizing team. It's not rude because you know from the start this person is there to do precisely this, and not divide his or her attention between what you say and what appears on his/her laptop: it's not someone *from the audience*.
>
> Then it might allow others, who aren't present, to simply benefit from the presentation.
>
> This way, or so it seems to me, it would have less to do with commentaries, reactions, and disruptions, and more to do with a wider sharing of the presenta-

> tion, with occasional feedback from people who follow what you're talking about on your screen.

I have no problem with that concept. One key is that the speakers *know* this will be done.

Finally (for now), a free copy of *kmworld* May 2004 arrived recently—including an essay by David Weinberger, "The backchannel world." Weinberger was clearly part of the same invitational conference that kicked off the whole controversy.

> Here's the lesson I learned from my disgraceful behavior at an excellent conference put on by Microsoft Research: Don't shush me.

That's the lead paragraph. He goes on to note that academics at the conference tended to think of presentation as a way to transfer information (they'd "rather be strictly right than interesting") while others "used showy graphics and were willing to overstate a point in order to make it" (they'd "rather be interesting than strictly right"). He suggests that an IRC backchannel was inevitable *because* Joi Ito was at the conference.

He recounts the incident described in *mamamusings* and the chiding by a host—and the decision to set up an invitation-only "back-backchannel." "The first order of business: to be adolescently defiant of authority. Second: to cuss freely and without point. Third: to pick on presenters." But then, he says, something else was going on—while they were "vastly amusing ourselves—albeit in some adolescent ways" they were also talking "about how to assimilate what the speaker was saying."

I read the whole essay. It's worth pointing out that the conference was about the "artificial social networks springing up all over" (Friendster, Orkut, etc.). He concludes: "Put humans together and we'll figure out what we'll do with the connection. The less you try to tell us about what we ought to be doing, the better and quicker we'll invent something new for ourselves. Just be sure not to shush us."

I don't know David Weinberger. I have yet to figure out what Orkut's good for, other than some bizarro notion that I could make meaningful contact with more than 400,000 people because of my 17 "friends" (most of whom are casual acquaintances). I do know that Weinberger's essay pushed me even further to the view I held when I started reading the whole set of comments and feedback, at least as applied to the kinds of conferences I would tend to attend or speak at. I won't bother to repeat that view; it's not one that celebrates backchat.

Standards

Since I've talked about OpenURL several times, it's worth mentioning the current status. NISO Z39.88, which would be OpenURL 1.0 when approved, completed its balloting round—with 40 Yes votes (four with comments) and three No votes. The standards committee is working to resolve the No votes and respond to the comments.

An Early Thought on Extended Coverage

Think of this as notes toward a later perspective or essay, here or somewhere else. Recently—over the past year, primarily—I've been doing extended coverage on certain issues, including some key hearings. Whenever I do such coverage, I'm torn between trimming it down to a compact summary and running it as is. Usually, I leave it as is (if only because radical trimming is so hard). Whenever I publish such an essay, I expect it to be ignored—but the essays almost always result in positive feedback and surprising links back to the issue.

I'm beginning to formulate a theory as to why I do these extended pieces, heavy on quotes from specific people. Part of it is to build a record, to make *Cites & Insights* useful as a source for medium-term history. Another part is to spare others the charges of straw men and red herrings that I've faced in a couple of my books and some articles—you know, like claims that no ebook supporters ever *really* claimed that print books were going away or that nobody *really* believes that academic libraries (a) should be avoided by students and faculty unless they just like books as physical objects, (b) are just ways to transfer research articles from writer to reader, or…well, you can name others.

In some past cases, I avoided using names and specific quotes when assailing a viewpoint because I believed that the writers could and would change their opinions. I should have known better. I don't believe I've *ever* used an "it's been said that" or "some claim" assertion without having had specific quotes, at least during my so-called research phase.

So one thing that these extended pieces may do is to nail down those straw men: They really do walk on two feet and breathe, and they really did say those outlandish things.

Trends & Quick Takes

What's My Tune?

A news feature by Kinley Levack in the April 2004 *EContent* discusses recommendation engines for music from SavageBeast and Siren Systems. These engines supposedly have "highly advanced methods to determine what kind of music is similar to whatever your musical taste *du jour* may be that are far more intuitive and intelligent than a traditional text-based search." The engines "analyze hundreds of attributes of songs in order to best categorize each selection."

SavageBeast looks at some 400 different traits in a song; Siren Systems looks at "700 data points" in songs. Both systems combine human and machine "intelligence" to categorize songs.

Do they work? The example shown for SavageBeast, Billy Joel's "Piano Man," offers overall recommendations and includes a bunch of "focus traits" so you can decide what "more like this" actually means to you. If I think of that song, I'll go along with "storytelling lyrics," "harmonica," and maybe "folk influence"—although I don't think of "Piano Man" in terms of mandolin or accordion, and for that matter "piano solo" strikes me as odd. The songs recommended in the example? Not bad for "storytelling lyrics." Siren Systems' "Soundflavor" has so few songs (5,000 or so, compared to a still-small 350,000 for SavageBeast) that it's hard to draw any conclusions. I certainly agree that text matches don't make sense for "more like this" music selection and that genre matches are awfully crude for individual songs. Where I take issue with the company spokespeople is when they overgeneralize, as product advocates typically do: Recommendation engines as "*the* logical next generation of search" and a claim that makes sense only in a shadow universe where only one model can win: "In the long run, a metadata model combined with collaborative capabilities *is the one* that will win out." It's never that simple—and if these systems scale and can be provided cost-effectively, it doesn't need to be.

Flexible Electronic Displays

"Nothing beats paper when it comes to displaying readable text in a comfortable, familiar form factor. That's one of the reasons that the ebook market has yet to take off." Those are the lead sentences in an *EContent* news feature (April 2004, 10-12) by Geoff Daily that discusses progress in the "not-so-new" technology of epaper, which—as Daily notes—has been around for 25 years or so!

The military has put lots of money into R&D for flexible displays for military use. That may be a different set of criteria than the supposed "last book" or newspaper replacement. The story is weakened a bit by the color photo showing SmartPaper at work in a signboard: Whether because of resolution problems or something else, the lettering on the sign is pathetically ugly and so crude that you have to double-check to tell an "n" from an "m." If that's what Gyricon can do with big letters, they're a *long* way from having acceptable text at normal text sizes.

Rescuing Old Recordings

An interesting news piece at NewScientist.com (April 20) about a new audio preservation and restoration technique developed at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. This technique uses a set of silicon detectors, originally designed to search for the Higgs boson, to *scan* the grooves of a record, with very high precision. Supposedly, algorithms used to eliminate noise in particle data recordings also work well to eliminate scratches and other flaws in the recording, after which the scan can be "played" on a "virtual record player."

While the piece discusses vinyl, that's loose journalism: It discusses "more than a million old vinyl records" in the British National Library Sound Archive and uses as an example a 1950 Leadbelly recording. When I read that, I thought, "Hmm. More likely to be a shellac 78 than a vinyl 33 or 45." Searching for other news stories confirmed that suspicion: "Vinyl" is used in this article, sloppily, as shorthand for "physical analog recording." Most recordings likely to be preserved and restored using these methods would be shellac, or wax cylinders, or other pre-vinyl forms.

The idea of playing a record without contacting its grooves isn't new; there is an expensive turntable that uses lasers to read the grooves. But the scanner should yield much more information than laser reading, and the software techniques for differentiating scratches from actual recorded information are probably more sophisticated.

The story included links to two sound files from that 1950 Leadbelly *shellac* recording of "Goodnight Irene"—one representing the original, the other after the scan-and-restore process was applied. The difference is astonishing, reducing heavy surface noise and scratches to a low level of surface noise with no apparent damage to the recording itself. Good stuff!

So Many Books!

According to Bowker, a staggering 175,000 new book titles and editions were published in the U.S. last year—19% more than the incredibly high figure for 2002. That includes 17,000 general adult fiction titles, 16,000 juvenile titles, and 12,000 titles from university presses. Overall, new titles have increased by 50% since 1994—and those titles come from a record 78,000 publishers, nearly 11,000 more than in 2002. More than 16,000 publishers are in California, more than twice as many as in New York—although New York City still has more publishers than any other city.

Maximum Burn

That's the title of an Alex Kosiorek article in *Radio Magazine* (April 1, 2004). Kosiorek, the audio recording and mastering engineer at the Corbett Studio at WGUC-FM, Cincinnatti, discusses CD-Rs—

particularly for audio use, and particularly when you might want to keep them for a while. CD-R "remains the most common optical media format used in audio/radio production environments"—but with higher-speed media and drives and ever-cheaper media, it can be problematic.

He offers some advice that may be useful if you're planning to make audio CD-Rs, and particularly if you plan to use them for several years:

- Don't use high-speed media in standalone audio recorders (you generally can't anyway, since most *consumer* standalone recorders will only accept audio-certified CD-Rs). Stay away from CD-Rs labeled for 48x or higher speed; 24x and 32x may be OK. The high-speed formulations may not work properly at the 1x and 2x speeds of audio recorders.
- There's no specific speed that will assure the fewest errors and best quality for any given medium. If you want to play it relatively safe, stay away from generic and store-brand CD-Rs, always use disc-at-once mode (standard for audio recording) rather than track-at-once mode, and try burning at roughly one-third of the *drive*'s maximum burn speed (which will never mean more than 16x in the real world). That will take a few minutes longer for each disc, but should keep you out of trouble.
- In his tests, Verbatim Data Life did the best—when burned at 8x or 16x. With Verbatim Plus, you know for sure where the discs are actually made (Mitsubishi Chemical); with most name brands, you can't be sure. (Verbatim also uses a different dye formulation than most other CD-Rs—it's obvious when you turn them over, as they're teal or bluish-green rather than silvery.)
- Keep CD-Rs away from sunlight, heat and moisture.
- Label discs carefully, with CD-certified pens (using adhesive labels only for discs you don't plan to keep forever).

Quicker Takes

Joi Ito may be one of the new gods of the internet, but based on a little *Wired* item he might want to learn to ask about prices. Going on a business trip, he got a new cell phone that allowed him to connect his notebook to the Internet via GPRS. Internet everywhere. "It was *sooo cool…*" The access rates were on the company's website, but I guess it's like actually listening to speakers at a conference: The A-list can't be bothered. His monthly bill was for $3,516.46—with $2,825.28 of that being data roaming charges. Reading 28MB of blogs in a car bound for the Zurich airport: $422.32. (*28MB* of blogs? I guess with moblogging and photos, and when you're in Ito's A-list position, that makes a curious sort of sense.)

Harry McCracken offers an interesting perspective in his "Up Front" column in the June 2004 *PC World*: "The more operating systems, the merrier." No, he's not a Linux convert. Instead, he ordered an Apple PowerBook to complement his two Windows desktops. "At the moment using both OSs seems utterly natural." He finds himself a "Mac snob on a part-time basis" and notes, "Odds are that the next computer I buy will be another Windows box, but I'm glad I realized that the Mac remains a viable option—even for a mostly Windows guy like me." Read the one-page column for more detail. (Would I consider a Mac under the right circumstances? I would and have, but the circumstances have never been right for me.)

If you've disdained email for its virus proclivities, don't believe instant messaging is safe. It isn't. Viruses and worms increasingly spread via IM, partly because it's a "softer target" in many cases. Good antivirus programs will catch most IM attacks, but you need to be as thoughtful about the links and attachments in IM as you would be in email.

Which Windows is most secure? According to Russ Cooper of TruSecure (in a recent presentation in Australia), newer isn't necessarily better—depending on how you measure. He tracked the number of patched vulnerablities in each Windows version, analyzing a total of 452 different vulnerabilities in 298 Microsoft Security bulletins. His conclusion was that older is better—*if* all you care about is the number of vulnerabilities. That's not all you *should* care about, of course, as he makes clear—and does anyone really want to run NT4.0 on a brand-new PC?

Ebooks, Etext and PoD

It's been half a year since the last roundup—and that's almost the only reason for this roundup. Don't expect startling new developments. Instead, we have a range of short items in chronological order, some slightly longer pieces, and a couple of semi-related commentaries. TRENDS & QUICK TAKES has a related note on commercial flexible displays.

A new way of telling a story?

J. Knight posted "Everything old is new again: the digital epistolary novel" at eBookWeb on January 8. He discusses *Intimacies*, a new ebook by Eric Brown,

and some claims made for this "new way of telling a story." An epistolary novel is one told through letters—*Dracula* and *84 Charing Cross Road* are good examples. *Intimacies* tells its story through a series of emails, an IM transcript, and some online newspaper pages—and you read it with special software (at www.greatamericannovel.com, if you're interested). The software creates frames to simulate email, IM, a browser, a pager—and you use various links to make your way through the story.

Knight notes that Brown calls it "popcorn" and agrees: It's lightweight "even by murder mystery standards." He found the "voyeuristic nature" of seeming to eavesdrop on email interesting enough to keep him going until the plot kicked in—and the whole thing only took an hour to read, even at the computer (it's apparently a very short enovel!).

So why mention it at all? Because fans declare in a feedback section that such a book could not exist on the printed page. Knight: "They're full of beans." The books noted above "present better stories, and *Dracula* draws from more types of epistolary matter than *Intimacies* does…" The new attempt is strictly linear: There's no real interactivity, according to Knight. "Ultimately, what would keep *Intimacies* from being published as a print book isn't the technology behind it, but the fact that it isn't really good enough to warrant print publication." (It may not be long enough either—how many novels can *you* read cover-to-cover in an hour?) Knight, a big supporter of ebooks, goes on to make a broader point:

> I'm not sure, really, why people put so much time and effort into trying to make eBooks something different and better than print books. The much-ballyhooed "interactivity" is a case in point. Engineers keep trying to foist it on us, and we keep running back to our plain-vanilla television and plain-vanilla print books because, most of the time, we want the authors and producers to do the work and entertain us rather than having to do their job ourselves…
>
> Sometimes innovation smells like desperation. We're desperate to create a new form because we've failed, so far, to adequately replicate the old one. No one has yet succeeded in making eBooks as readable, affordable or easy to use as print books, so they employ sleight of hand and toss something like *Intimacies* into the air, crying out, "Look at this! Look at this! (And never mind that pile of abandoned reading devices and rejected formats behind the curtain.)"
>
> I still believe in the future of eBooks, but only if manufacturers and publishers concentrate on the basics: a large, clear screen; long battery life; affordable reading devices; low-priced content; reasonable, not intrusive copy protection.

Maybe this is the best point to discuss something I've had on hand for more than a year: the *Journal of Digital Information* 3:3 (January 2003). It should be available from jodi.ecs.soton.ac.uk. It's a special issue on "hypertext criticism: writing about hypertext." To make it special, the editors tried to make the issue itself hypertextual:

> We invited submissions consisting of one or more brief nodes which we would then link together to create a hypertextual journal issue: an interconnected discussion of a topic rather than disconnected articles.

The editors "hope that this issue can serve as a landmark in the way hypertext criticism is perceived by authors, theorists and the general public alike." They apparently believe the issue is a big success from which "the picture becomes clearer than it has ever been before." I tried to read the issue more than a year ago. I gave it several tries over several different days. And my conclusion was and is that, if this makes "the picture" clearer, then it must have been wholly obscure before. I was never able to make sense of the issue except as a set of gimmicks. Of course, I'm working at a disadvantage. The editor's introduction tells us that in the last decade or so, "hypertext fiction and electronic literature has developed immensely." How many hypertext novels or short stories or whatever have you read? How many are you aware of? I read that "Writers use links confidently, and electronic literature has become widespread on the Web" and I sit bemused.

Part of my problem may be language itself. Here, unaltered, are the first sentences of the first and fifth (last) paragraph of Mez Breeze's node, with the stirring title "Inappropriate Format[]ing][: Craft-Orientation vs. Networked Content[s]":

> From the point-of-view of this net.art practitioner-plus-reviewer, it seems evident that various web/net/code artists are more likely to be accepted into an academic reification circuit/traditional art market if they produce works that reflect a traditional craft-worker positioning.
>
> In relation to Translucidity functioning in terms of/as an apparatus/application, the dominant visuality of the work overloads [and overcodes] the weighting of the actual content.

Breeze is from Australia. Maybe that version of English is diverging from American faster than I believed. Readers who find themselves immersed in hypertext fiction are welcome to point me to prime examples.

Actually, one "node" did seem readable and sensible—Julianne Chatelain's "Learning from science fiction criticism: Excessive candour." She notes that the early community of English-speaking science fiction readers and writers "had an uncanny resemblance to the present community of people engaged in working with and on hypertext fiction. In both communities:"

> Almost everyone who read the stuff also wrote the stuff.
>
> Most community members where "friends" and as such were unwilling to write anything publicly critical of other members' work.

Is that it? I'm unaware of any worthwhile hypertext fiction because I'm not part of the hypertext community?

D-Lib, February 2004

Bonita Wilson offered a brief editorial on "Innovations in book production," coupling an NPR story on Powis Parker's on-site book-binding machines with Anywhere Books, a nonprofit planning to use a "digital bookmobile" to produce instant books in Uganda. Similar efforts are underway in Egypt and India. Brewster Kahle has demonstrated the capability. I wonder about the claim that you can produce an on-demand book for "as little as $1.00 each"—given laser printing, I'd expect toner and paper costs alone to exceed that figure, except for booklets—but the piece raises an excellent point: Very inexpensive on-demand print books may make more sense than ebooks in third-world countries, since the print books don't require access to computers and the internet (or electricity, for that matter). "Frequently, there seems to be a tension between how a new technology affects the stakeholders from various communities—in this case, first world and third world communities. It is refreshing when a technological breakthrough can be seen as a positive thing for all."

True. I should point out that this whole discussion concerns print-on-demand books, which are only "ebooks" when that appellation suits the needs of advocates. PoD books are books, pure and simple.

Rosetta Bulletin, February 9, 2004

"Ebooks: Evolution, not revolution, in book publishing" first appeared in Seattle Book Company's *Rosetta Bulletin* e-newsletter and was republished at eBookWeb. It's an interesting story, debunking the "replacement" theory but still having some questionable facts. And, unlike some recent ebook stories, this one *admits* that many news stories included lines like "Ebooks will soon replace print books." It's also a revealing story in an unexpected way: I learned that Hard Shell Word Factory, an early "e-only" publisher since 1996, has started offering print versions of their more popular titles.

Still, according to Ted Treanor of Seattle Book Company, "ebooks have been doing well for some time." He sees them as an *additional* medium, similar to audiobooks. There's the usual percentage-only growth claim: 30% growth of ebook sales in the first half of 2003 as compared to 2002, as compared to "annual growth of only about 5 percent for print publishing"—and, unfortunately, the usual lack of a reality check: 30% of $2.5 million (say) is still a whole lot less than 5% of $12 billion (for half a year). But it doesn't look as great when you say "ebook sales increased by $750,000 in the first half of 2003 as compared to 2002, while print book sales increased by a mere $600,000,000." Those may not be the right numbers, but the magnitude's right.

Ludwig von Mises Institute, March 22, 2004

Jeffery Tucker edits Mises.org and provides a good four-page article, "Books, online and off." That piece explains why the Mises Institute has joined a few other publishers (e.g., National Academies Press) in posting its published books online for free.

> The point is to expand the market and not assume a fixed number of consumers. Books online and offline reinforce the viability of each other, just as movies in theaters boost movies in rental, and free radio helps the market for CDs for purchase.

Most recently, the press published a $50 1,550-page hardbound, *Man, Economy, and State, with Power and Market*—and simultaneously posted the whole text of the book in PDF. This is, of course, a highly specialized nonprofit publisher with a mission to publicize "Austrian economics," but it's not the only case. Baen Books posts *some* science fiction works online to boost the sales of all their books; National Academies has found their policy to work well; and I'm guessing that Lawrence Lessig's *Free Culture* will do just fine as a print book. I was about to write "*despite* being available online in several permutations," but I think "despite" is the wrong word.

E Ink Corporation, March 24, 2004

A press release from Philips, Sony, and E Ink announced Sony's LIBRIé, the "world's first consumer application of an electronic paper display module" in an ebook reader. Philips makes the display; Sony puts the reader together and markets it—and will probably control ebook downloading. E Ink supplies the electronic ink to Toppan Printing, which makes it into a film that Philips integrates with circuitry.

The press release touts a "truly paper-like reading experience." The device is reflective. Resolution is 170dpi, giving "an appearance similar to that of the most widely read material on the planet—newspaper." There's not even the *claim* of book quality: it's "near-newspaper" print quality. Supposedly, four AAA batteries will handle 10,000 pages, since the display uses power only when an image is changed. The device will only be available in Japan, at least initially.

What would such a press release be without one overenthusiastic statement? Here's Him Veninger from Philips: "The precision of this new high-resolution electronic ink display technology will

revolutionize the way consumers read and access textual information."

Michigan Tech, March 31

"A good read—the way in which an idea is read" by John Holmlund appeared in *Michigan Tech Lode*. It's a brief piece that considers the potential *loss* in computer-based books as compared to print books, even if the display problems are solved. It's an interesting little essay, recommended without further comment: www.mtulode.com/printarticle.php?ArticleID=3278.

EContent, April 2004

Safari Books Online seems to be a sensible proposition—a niche service offering subscriptions for $15 or $20 a month to get full-text tech books from O'Reilly, Que, Sams, and other computer book publishers. The writeup in *EContent* (April 2004, p. 12 & 14) makes it sound like a plausible, workable market: The kind of specialized market that "ebooks" serve best. The collection has been set up so that you can search thousands of books simultaneously; within a homogeneous collection such as computer technology, that's enormously sensible. What's surprising, then, is the reaction of Rich Levin of *Book Tech Magazine*: "It is still very much a niche market, with an extremely small base, and it is questionable if it is ever going to achieve critical mass." Later, Levin even questions the *usefulness* of this sort of service: "I'm not sure why anyone would pay to subscribe to this service when the answer to any question a programmer has can be answered instantaneously in a user group." Say what? I'm as much a skeptic about ebooks as anyone—but putting down a workable niche because you could get wholly-unverifiable answers from some idiot for free strikes me as a bit much. "Critical mass" for Safari Books doesn't mean 50% of the print books market or 0.5% of that market: It means having enough revenue to exceed costs. Good niches can do that, and can be valuable for those who need them.

Slate, May 5, 2004

Jack Shafer's "Honey, they shrunk the newspaper" concerns his experience using the electronic versions of some major print newspapers—etext, if not ebooks. One common projection among digital-everything enthusiasts is that your slate reader could eliminate all those pounds of paper landing on your driveway. "I should be raving about how incredibly cool it is to download the searchable and printable versions of three of my favorite papers onto my ultralight, wi-fied laptop and tote them around the house, into the backyard, and onto the subway. So why are these electronic editions as comfortable as a fat man trapped in an iron suit designed by a boa constrictor?"

He finds that the editions—which simulate the print edition—"induce claustrophobia, even when displayed on a large flat-panel monitor." It's like "reading a newspaper through a six-panel colonial window in which five of the panes have been blacked out." He makes an odious comparison to reading newspapers on microfilm.

To Shafer, print newspapers are easy to explore, easy to share, "require no user manual" and never break when you drop them. "Nearly 400 years of thinking have gone into newspaper readability"—and there are sufficiently consistent norms that, although different papers use different typefaces and column widths, you can pick up a new paper and make sense of it immediately.

Shafer exaggerates in claiming that print newspaper circulation is "in free fall"—many of the morning metropolitan papers continue to have growing circulation—but he nails the impact of the e-subscriptions: "More people attend home games of the Class A Delmarva Shorebirds (3,460) than subscribe to the *New York Times* e-editions (daily, 3,331; Sunday, 2,780)." I'm astonished the numbers are that high. Shafer goes on to suggest ways that big papers *could* generate e-editions that would make sense—delivering something new and better.

Walking Paper, May 17, 2004

"Once bitten" is the title of this one-page weblog posting about acquiring new media and technologies in libraries. "Have you ever said something that you wish you could take back? That's how I think many libraries feel about the whole eBook fiasco." The author goes on to note that ebooks were being pushed by the producers, not requested by readers. He contrasts this with books on MP3, where the library would *not* need to lend out playing devices and there *does* seem to be some user demand. There are serious digital restrictions management issues (except for MP3/CD audiobooks), noted briefly, but the general point is good: Just because ebooks/dedicated readers didn't make sense doesn't mean that libraries should ignore other possibilities.

This brings one big question and one small-but-growing thought to mind. I'll drop the question here and possibly return to it in later issues; I'll mention the thought, which could turn into a full-fledged essay or article.

Question: Why haven't we heard about the results of those grant-funded ebook-appliance experiments? They got a lot of publicity when libraries were buying hundreds (thousands?) of REB devices, propping up the failing company. What were the actual results? Where are all those readers now? Did their use ever justify the purchase costs—and could that grant money have seen better use? I'm guessing

we would have widely-publicized stories about big successes with these dedicated devices. Were the failures simply covered over as libraries rushed to try something new?

Thought: In the case of ebooks (and particularly dedicated ebook appliances), libraries were "getting out ahead" of patrons—demonstrably, since the number of consumers who purchased ebook readers for their own use is so small that nobody's ever offered an estimate. My guess is that it's almost always a bad idea for public libraries to try to be ahead of their users in adopting new media, particularly new circulating media. Instead, I believe, it makes sense to be a little behind: Ready at the point where a new medium serves more than the most privileged set of "haves" in the community. But that's still rough thinking, and far be it from me to criticize library actions. More later, maybe.

Open eBook Forum, June 3, 2004

"Record eBook retail sales set in Q1 2004; Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code* tops bestselling Ebooks for May."

That's the head on a press release issued during Book Expo America. For a change, there are dollar numbers behind the usual percentage increases. First quarter 2004 saw 46% increase in units over 2003Q1, but 28% revenue increase—in other words, average prices continue to drop (the first-half 2003 unit increase was 40%, revenue 30%). What do those huge increases amount to? 421,955 "eBooks" sold, with $3.233 million in revenues—still considerably less than one-tenth of one percent of print book sales.

One enormous unanswered question: do those "eBook" figures include PoD print books?

Longer Articles

Dorner, Jane, "Literature of the Book—e-books," *Logos* 14:3, republished on eBookWeb in two parts.

"E-publishing is still a self-defining medium, so choosing the literature of the e-book is a daunting task." Dorner explicitly excludes e-journals, "a different matter altogether." She admits that it's way too soon for a balanced assessment of the field; "my list will just be an historic snapshot of roughly where we are now."

Then we get the hype: "The consultancy firm, Accenture, has predicted that by 2005, e-books will make up 10 percent of all book sales." That such a prediction could appear in 2003 is nothing short of astounding and would require a bizarre redefinition of "books"—or, I suppose, an increase in ebook sales of roughly 10,000% over the next two years!

Hype aside, this is an interesting treatment. Here's what Dorner has to say about linear narrative, what books do best: "Unfortunately, e-books do not cope well with language in continuous text." But, she says, e-publishing is just a child, "barely 30 years old."

Did Alan Kay actually use Apple's Newton as the basis for his Dynabook? That's not the way I remember it, but it's been a long time. Dorner says, "Interactive fiction has…burgeoned—but it does not sell." "Burgeoned is one of those interesting terms, particularly for something nobody buys.

The second half is a list of books—*all* print books (and one article)—and a handful of "online e-ssays" and "online e-zines about e-books." It's a curious list and perhaps more interesting for that. Dorner comments on a book about digital type that paper, ink, typography, and print techniques "is replaced now by screen resolution, e-ink, and e-paper." *"Is* replaced" seems a bit excessive with ebooks at less than 0.1% of the print book market, but that's the wording.

Dorner doesn't agree with Lawrence Lessig's view of copyright or the idea that Disney and its ilk are manipulating the law for their own purposes. She notes that Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* may be overrated and has "some cranky ideas" (I couldn't agree more). She states that *Being Digital* is an "accessible and stimulating look at the digital lifestyle of the future, and the way in which it *will* merge audio and visual experiences." After all, Negroponte couldn't possibly be wrong…

All in all, worth reading.

Doctorow, Cory, "Ebooks: Neither e, nor books," February 12, 2004.

This is a text version of a talk Doctorow gave at the 2004 O'Reilly Emerging Technology Conference. It's worth noting that Doctorow is both a science fiction writer (who's successful experimented with "giving away" his books online simultaneously with print publication) and an EFF person. This speech carries a Creative Commons "no rights reserved" license, so I could legally reprint the entire thing, sell it for profit, use it as the basis for a best-selling novel, or whatever. The 14-page piece is a fascinating read, whether you agree with Doctorow or not—and I frequently don't. Here's his set of eight ideas about ebooks and books, which in expanded form are the first half of the paper:

- **Ebooks aren't marketing**. Well, they are (that is, they can be used to market print books) but they shouldn't *just* be marketing. And here's an odd one: "In the final analysis, more people will read more words off more screens and fewer words off fewer

pages"—although the latter assertion has zero real-world evidence to back it up. (That sentence continues; in fact, Doctorow apparently believes that ebooks are *the* inevitable future of books: "ebooks are gonna have to be the way that writers earn their keep.")

- **Ebooks complement paper books**. "For now," apparently, given his preceding sentences.
- **Unless you own the ebook, you don't 0wn the book."** Clearly, I'm not part of the digerati, since I haven't the vaguest idea what "0wn" means. There's a lot more here, including a repeat of Kahle's claim that you can produce a "four-color, full-bleed, perfect-bound, laminated-cover, printed-spine paper book in ten minutes, for about a dollar." Which I flat-out don't believe unless "book" means booklet.
- **Ebooks are a better deal for writers**. Because, in science fiction, word rates are measly, so "the primary incentive for writing has to be artistic satisfaction, egoboo, and a desire for posterity. Ebooks get you that." Sure they do.
- **Ebooks need to embrace their nature—** which revolves around the "mix-ability and send-ability of electronic texts." On the value axes of a paper book, "ebooks fail." That is, they can't beat (or match) print books for typography and the like.
- **Ebooks demand a different attention span (but not a shorter one).** Sorry, but I read his whole spiel three times, and I'll be damned if I can understand what he's saying.
- **We need *all* the ebooks.** Again I'm not sure just what he's saying, although he does talk about a "proper ebook revolution."
- **Ebooks are like paper books**. That leads off a long section that compares ebooks to paper books, and you'd have to read it.

Doctorow is one of those who thinks "scary hax0r kids" is a meaningful phrase, and maybe it is to his audience. He says *as a certainty* that "fewer people are reading fewer words off fewer pages every day," which is almost certainly false, while at the same time admitting that "screen resolutions are too low to effectively replace paper." He has the usual sneering reason that we buy physical books—"because of their visceral appeal." What about *because they work*?

Am I recommending this piece? I think so. With considerable reservations. Or maybe reservati0ns, if I knew the difference.

Two from VALA

I believe both of these PDFs came from the 2004 VALA conference (Victorian Association for Library Automation), the latest in a series of strong biennial Australian conferences. They should not be difficult to find on the web. Both are **worth reading**, even if I'm poking a bit at some of the content. I'm not offering adequate summaries in either case.

Wendy Abbott and Kate Kelly, both at Bond University Library, write "Sooner or later!—Have e-books turned the page?" Here's another paper that acknowledges that my straw men really did walk on two feet, noting "decades of premature 'death-of-the-book' prophecies" and a specific 1979 assertion from computer scientist Chris Evans: "The 1980s will see the book…begin a steady slide into oblivion." Despite all that, the authors say, "In all probability, the e-book is here to stay and set to eventually take its place *alongside* its more traditional antecedents." [Emphasis added.] The paper discusses market forces and ebook experiments at Bond. There's a bit of easy futurism in that discussion—"The eventual convergence of mobile phones, PDAs, laptops, notebooks and wireless communications will produce small mobile devices with unparalleled portability, computing power and connectivity. As mobile devices become ubiquitous in everyday life…" Convergence: it's inevitable.

Never mind. The Bond case study chose an easy target: The School of Information Technology, with students who are "erratic library users" and with IT books well suited to ebook use. I'd expect that ebooks would work better in such a setting than almost anywhere else. Bond signed up for a 2-user license for Books24x7—but that didn't work out because the vendor had absurd tracking requirements. Back to the drawing boards, or, rather, to Safari Books, first in a trial period, then with all of *90* titles from Safari's 3,000-title (or 1,500-title) list, again with a two-user license. Those 90 books cost about as much as Books24x7's 3,000 books would have cost. How well were those books used—by IT students, note, with the 90 books selected on the basis of usage? "During the first two months that the 90 Safari Books titles have been available, approximately 40% of the books have been accessed." In other words, *students have looked at 36 books at least once*. That's hardly a massive success story, but these are early days! Comments about what students liked and disliked about the books follow. Then there's one of those tricky numbers-versus-percentage comparisons: 66.4% of the print collection (size unknown) was *circulated* in the first two years of availability, while 40% of the ebook titles were *accessed* in the first two months. Maybe

cessed in the first two months. Maybe that shows ebooks as being "more popular," but maybe not.

Paul Mercieca of RMIT University titled his paper "E-book acceptance: what will make users read on screen?" The abstract notes "the reluctance to read large textual titles on current screen technology." My question: Why should the library or university *make* users read on screen?

Why wouldn't they? He notes the studies showing that on-screen reading is 25% to 40% slower than print reading and that we tend to skim on the screen. He notes that students are reluctant to use electronic textbooks—but would consider using them in the library "primarily if there was no alternative printed texts." When asked, students found that screen reading from PDF images caused eye strain. Even those who found on-screen reading relatively easy said they were reading on screen "because they had to." The study goes on to suggest enhancements that might seduce students into screen reading: additional material, animations of key concepts, inclusion of other media. We're also told that libraries may be important in "developing acceptance" of electronic textbooks.

I repeat: Why *should* students be forced to read on screen? What higher societal purpose is served by forcing them to use a medium they clearly dislike for long textual reading? I see no answers in this paper.

The Library Stuff

Farrelly, Michael, "The culture wars," *Bookslut* (May 5, 2004). www.bookslut.com

What? You don't know about *Bookslut*? Take a look. It's mostly book reviews with a mix of columns, well written with loads of attitude. There's also a related weblog by the editor. Farrelly does the Library Rakehell column. This one's a doozy:

> I woke up one morning not too long ago and realized that in the "culture war" being waged by conservatives I am nothing short of a terrorist insurgent.
>
> I am not armed with rocket-propelled grenades, chemical weapons or even a vaunted dirty bomb.
>
> Rather my library science degree, framed and hanging on a wall in the back room of my mother's house, is the weapon of mass destruction they fear the most.

This isn't an attack on conservatives. It *is* an attack on neocons, the movement that "runs on ignorance and snap judgments." Think Rush Limbaugh, Michael Savage, Ann Coulter—those who "make their bread and butter filling the airwaves with half-truths, presumptions and sketchy information." They're not true conservatives: They don't *really* believe in smaller federal government (as long as Republicans are in charge).

This is the group that detests ALA for saying it's up to parents to decide what their children read and view—that it is *not* the role of the library to dumb down everything else so parents can use it as a free child-care center. A true conservative might think that government should *generally* not act in loco parentis—but, as Farrelly reminds us, these people are not real conservatives. (A true conservative might hold firmly to the First Amendment as well!)

One columnist has come up with this nonsense after grumping about librarians letting down their hair—"usually wrapped in a tight bun, of course"—to criticize the USA PATRIOT act: "Librarians now constitute one of the country's main centers of thoughtless and unreconstructed leftism. It is the sort of ideology that you expect to find among naïve college students and destitute Latin American peasants. But librarians?" Well, yes—not because librarians are "thoughtless and unreconstructed" lefties (whatever that might mean), but because you can read and pay attention to what the laws actually say.

There's more, in a bold and—in my opinion—generally correct column. As Farrelly notes, "no librarian in their right mind would allow a child to view pornography"—and that has *nothing* to do with approving censorware that blocks out huge swaths of constitutionally protected material for all patrons.

> There is a bitter twist in all this librarian hatred. Librarians are all for freedom of expression no matter what is being said. A good library has Bill O'Reilly's latest screed in its collection along with Al Franken's histrionics. Michael Moore's bombast should be as readily available as any Nazi propaganda film. There is an equality of ideas, good and bad, within a library. Librarians don't agree with everything on their shelf…
>
> Anyone who hates a librarian simply for their profession should be immediately suspect no matter their political orientation. Opposition to libraries is opposition to an informed populace.

Fernandez, Joe, "Facing live reference," *Online* 28:3 (May/June 2004): 37-40.

This is an interesting commentary on the growing phenomenon of computer-mediated real-time reference service. You might know it as "ask a librarian" or "virtual reference." I'm including this article partly because I'm astonished by the name Fernandez chooses for the article, one that's apparently common in Australia: Live reference. I always assumed live reference was what happened at the reference desk, but Fernandez labels that "face-to-face (FtF) communication." I guess. We learn that "LR is now considered an essential part of many virtual

libraries." I wasn't aware that there *were* so many virtual libraries…

It's a good article, but at least one sentence struck me as sufficiently unusual to deserve direct quotation: "In this dyadic, synchronous, and task-oriented form of computer-mediated communication (CMC), theories and concepts from the field of pragmatics are taken to a completely new dimension." I'm sure they are.

Morgan, Eric Lease, "SRW and SRU in five hundred words or less," *D-Lib* 10:5 (May 2004).

This brief discussion introduces Search and Retrieve Web Service (SRW) and Search and Retrieve URL Service (SRU), two protocols viewed as the "next generation Z39.50" for querying databases and returning search results. Both protocols are simpler than Z39.50 (with three operations—explain, scan, and searchRetrieve) and designed as web services; SRW uses SOAP while SRU uses URLs. Both use Common Query Language (CQL), presumably defined as part of the overall specification. This introduction just gets you started; it does include the URL for the NISO documents: www.loc.gov/z3950/agency/zing/srw/

Five from RLG DigiNews

Start at www.rlg.org and go from there.

Bausenbach, Ardie, "Character sets and character encoding: A brief introduction," *RLG DigiNews* 8:2 (April 15, 2004).

Here's a good, brief, understandable introduction to Unicode—why it's needed, how it works and how it relates to XML and MARC21. It won't tell you everything you need to know, but it will get you started.

Deegan, Marilyn, and Harold Short, Dawn Archer, Paul Baker, Tony McEnery, and Paul Rayson, "Computational linguistics meets metadata, or the automatic extraction of key words from full text content," *RLG DigiNews* 8:2 (April 15, 2004).

Six authors for a six-page article: Sometimes that's how cutting-edge research gets reported. This article reports on a Mellon-funded pilot project to see whether meaningful keywords could be extracted algorithmically from masses of OCR-converted scanned full text. The project used the Forced Migration Online content—80,000 pages of full text from the grey literature and journals on human displacement (refugees, diasporas, etc.). I won't attempt a detailed summary; the conclusions are positive—some degree of automatic extraction does appear to be workable in situations such as these.

Hedstrom, Margaret, "Research agendas set course for digital archiving and long-term preservation," *RLG DigiNews* 7:6 (December 15, 2003).

This brief article discusses two reports that propose complementary research agendas for digital archiving and long-term preservation. Both reports—linked from *RLG DigiNews*, which doesn't include the URLs in the clear text—"stress the growing centrality of digital information in government, commerce, research and education, cultural heritage, and even interpersonal communications" and the inadequacy of current preservations strategies. I note this article to remind those interested in true digital preservation that the problems aren't even close to being solved; these reports reflect some of the efforts to find solutions.

LeFurgy, William G., "PDF/A: Developing a file format for long-term preservation," *RLG DigiNews* 7:6 (December 15, 2003).

PDF has enormous advantages for text-based digital documents. It maintains a faithful image of the intended layout, in part by embedding typefaces as needed. It's easy to generate. It can include good navigation tools and allows some level of searching. The disadvantages—other than not being pure text open to pure-text manipulation—relate mostly to its status as Adobe's proprietary format.

This article discusses a preservation standard based on PDF—PDF/A. As specified in a draft ISO standard, PDF/A doesn't allow inclusion of audio and video content, Javascript or other executables, or encryption, and requires that all fonts must be embedded (and legally embeddable) and that colorspaces be specified in a device-independent manner. The standard, if adopted, will presumably also make PDF/A an effectively open format, not a proprietary format. Important work to make preservation of formatted digital publications practical; clearly explained and worth following.

Steenbakkers, Johan F., "Treasuring the digital records of science: Archiving e-journals at the Koninklijke Bibliotheek," *RLG DigiNews* 8:2 (April 15, 2004).

The KB is the national and depository library of the Netherlands; it's also one of the first to attempt to serve as a true digital archive for e-journals. In this case, you need to put location and corporation together: Elsevier Science is a Dutch operation, and

Elsevier now has a formal archiving agreement with the KB. National libraries are almost certainly the best candidates among existing institutions to serve as trusted digital repositories. While such repositories might be "dark archives" at present, the formal agreements mean that they would become accessible resources at any point that Elsevier or a successor was no longer able to provide access to articles.

This article describes the KB's "e-Depot" and some of the long-term implications for digital preservation. This is important stuff; the article bears close reading.

Interesting & Peculiar Products

Amazing Speed!

What else can I say about Toshiba's $600 RD-XS32 combination PVR and DVD burner? It comes with an 80GB hard disk and VCR Plus+, and it writes to DVD-R, DVD-RW or DVD-RAM (but not DVD+R/RW). Here's what's amazing, according to the blurb in *Sound & Vision* 69:3: "Transferring shows from the hard disk to DVD is fast work—24x speed for DVD-R/RW and 12x for DVD-RAM." Given that the fastest media for DVD-R/RW support 8x recording, that's nothing short of amazing. (On reflection, it *is* possible—if you're recording shows at the lowest quality, worse than VHS.)

Escient FireBall DVDM-100

In *Cites & Insights* 4:6, I grumbled about a "movie server" that could serve up to 160 DVD images from hard disk, for a mere $27,000 (roughly nine times as much as the DVDs cost). The April 2004 *Sound & Vision* offers a slightly less snazzy device for considerably less than one-tenth the price—but this time, the reviewer says it's "expensive for features provided."

Maybe so. What the FireBall does is pass through information from other devices. More specifically, you can connect up to three DVD/CD megachangers (e.g., Sony makes units that hold 400 DVDs/CDs) and the FireBall will catalog all of the disks (via a needed internet connection). Since Ken Pohlmann (the reviewer) is a fanboy for digital convergence, he loves the idea—but admits that $1,999 may be a little much. Maybe not: If you actually have 1,200 DVDs and store them all in monster changers, I suspect a device like this makes sense.

SoftwareToGo

I think this one's interesting, if not particularly revolutionary. Today's computer stores don't have enough shelf space for any but the biggest programs and games. This kiosk can stock some 1,500 software titles from 240 publishers. You look over what you want, decide on a package, and make the purchase decision. The machine gives you an order receipt; you take that to a sales clerk, who produces a CD-R and gives you a packaged CD with the vendor's custom label and printed case. For packages too hefty for reasonable downloads and too obscure to garner shelf space, this could make sense. It's being test-marketed in a couple dozen CompUSA stores, and should be in all of them by this fall. (Information from *PC World* 22:5)

Digital Music Players Today

PC Magazine 23:8 (May 4, 2004) has a good roundup, "Play as you go," covering nine flash memory players and three current hard-drive miniplayers. Top honors among the flash players—some of which, I believe, can be used equally well as "keychain drives" for general-purpose file storage—is the $160 iRiver iFP-390T, a ruvey little device that can rip MP3s directly from your stereo, has a built-in microphone, and includes an FM tuner. It's appropriately tiny (3.5x1.5x1.0", 2.1oz) and has 256MB capacity—but it *doesn't* show up as a drive when you plug it in, so it's not a general-purpose storage device. They got just over 13 hours of playback on a single AA nickel-hydride battery. The three hard-drive units are all smaller, lower-capacity devices than the 15GB-and-up units, but the result is pretty much the same: Editors' Choice goes to Apple's $249 iPod Mini. It seems like an expensive unit given its 4GB capacity as compared to the $299 15GB iPod, but it's cute and small: 3.6x2.0x0.5", 3.4oz. On the other hand, using iTunes to rip CDs stinks when compared to MusicMatch (*much* slower and you have to play the CD), and you'll get around 7 hours of battery life.

Double-Layer Recordable DVD

Sony is on the verge of releasing two DVD+R DL drives, a $230 internal and $330 external. These drives can record to new dual-layer DVD+Rs blanks—which, like dual-layer pressed DVDs, offer a bit less than twice the capacity of a single-layer disc. The little *PC Magazine* story claims "4 hours of MPEG-2 video or 2,000 songs" and ends with this sentence: "And the fact that two feature-length movies will fit on one disc could draw the interest of pirates and the ire of entertainment companies." Except that most Hollywood DVDs these days *already* use two layers for a single movie—and true pirates either have access to DVD pressing facilities or are perfectly willing to overcompress movies to get more on a disc. What the dual-layer DVD+R

could mean for movies, if 321 Studios is able to find a legal way to sell its backup software, is that you could make a personal backup copy of a typical Hollywood movie without losing special features. But that's a very big if.

The Good Stuff

Manes, Stephen, "The ultimate personal technology: Paper," *PC World* 22:5 (May 2004): 200.

This is a cute column about the advantages of paper, even (or particularly) for full-time technology freaks. He discusses archival issues, the virtues of *paper* datebooks in lieu of PDAs, and how much better he thinks the print version of *PC World* looks and works than the Web-based equivalent. (I'm astonished at a hatchet-job review Manes wrote on Lawrence Lessig's new book, but that's a different matter. Read this column instead.)

Miller, Ron, "Can RSS relieve information overload?" *EContent* 27:3 (March 2004): 20-4.

In some ways, this is an unusual introduction to RSS, since it focuses on "enterprise employees," the corporate market. Along with a brief introduction, Miller offers a few examples of corporate RSS use, along with a sidebar on the Librarian's Index to the Internet and LII's use of RSS.

As usual, some RSS folk slightly overstate the case against other delivery media, with Chris Pirillo of Lockergnome declaring, "Email is dead." The article also misses the possibility that the frequent harvesting done by RSS tools may be a problem for weblogs and other sites, but that's hardly surprising: That issue's just beginning to gain visibility. All in all, a good treatment that provides a corporate balance to the usual personal view of RSS.

Miller, Ron, "Get the picture," *EContent* 27:4 (April 2004): 30-5.

Here's an article about graphical approaches to Web search results. Yawn. Not so fast: Miller takes a balanced view, offering some interesting examples of possibilities while recognizing the difficulties of graphical result interfaces, even for people who are graphically inclined. "Visual searching" certainly has a place. The questions are what that place really is and whether visual searching should *replace* textual results.

Greg Notess "doesn't see visual search tools making a significant impact on generalized search" and sees some movement away from graphics and toward pure text. Danny Sullivan tends to agree: "Just because it looks cool doesn't mean it's useful." Given the overenthusiastic pronouncements of visual-search suppliers, this may seem awfully negative, but I'm not sure that's true. You could suggest that Notess and Sullivan are, like me, text-oriented—or you could consider that visual search may be most useful in specialized areas. It sounds as though some software suppliers are recognizing that possibility. Tim Bray Antarctica Systems (apparently they've dropped the strange punctuation) admits that "generalized Web search is a very tough row to hoe"—but enterprise searching and other specialized areas may be reasonable targets. Worth reading.

Stone, M. David, "Personal printers," *PC Magazine* 23:9 (May 23, 2004): 114-22.

This "essential buying guide" offers good advice on buying a printer—and deciding what kind of printer to buy. You know the usual rules: If you print a *lot* of text and long-term costs matter, buy a laser printer; if you need the best possible photo quality, buy a "photo printer." The discussion of multifunction printers is useful, particularly in its suggestion that you not pay too much attention to claims for scanner resolution and color depth or (as with all inkjets) to speed claims. In practice, the claims may be misleading but it doesn't much matter: Most user needs are satisfied with 300dpi to 600dpi scanning and 24-bit resolution, and almost all of today's units exceed both those minima.

Tenner, Edward, "Rebound," Boston *Globe*, April 25, 2004.

Here's the subhead: "A decade ago, seers predicted that technology would bury the printed word. So why are there more books than ever?" Tenner notes that many "would-be replacements of books" have vanished—while print persists, with a 36% increase in book sales since 1997. He notes early predictions of the death of print (1895) and Nicholas Negroponte's confident 1996 projection that epaper would be ready "during the next couple of years." So what's happened to the book? According to Gabriel Zaid, the number of book titles published each year has quadrupled in the fifty years since TV was introduced—from an astonishing quarter-million titles to an even more astonishing million titles. Zaid sees the real problem as a flood of books: "If a person reads a book a day, he would be neglecting to read 4,000 others, published the same day."

Tenner offers three major paradoxes that help to explain the robust state of print book publishing:

- Books have multiplied partly because "they have become less and less important as in-

formation storage technologies." We *depend* on them less (most data never winds up in book form), which leads to broader variety for the purposes books do serve well.

- Electronic media "often were less efficient than they appeared." CD-ROM is offered as a prime example.
- "Books survive because technology has made it much easier to write and publish them." Desktop composition (called "desktop publishing") and print-on-demand publishing makes it easy for a tiny publisher to compete; that helps to explain the 70,000 publishers in the U.S., up from 21,000 in 1986. How far could this grow? Tenner cites a survey showing that *81%* of Americans would like to write a book. (The attack of the PoD People continues!)

Tenner does see "less zest for reading among today's college students"—but also notes that even in the so-called "golden age of print culture" (which he puts at the 1880s to 1930s), the literati were appalled by the trashy preferences of the masses—and it's certainly true that more people read more books now than at any time in the past.

A good piece that ends nicely: "Coping with the problems of the new book market will take creative thinking from publishers, librarians, authors, and readers. But it's clear by now that the book needs not last rites but fresh air and exercise."

I do have to tweak Tenner a bit for one sentence, though—after noting that *Poetry Magazine*, with 11,000 subscribers, receives 90,000 submissions a year. "And how many aspiring novelists buy and read serious fiction?" My immediate response: Who defines "serious"?

Wolf, Gary, "The return of push!," *Wired* 12.05 (May 2004): 31-4.

It is with pleasure that I'll soon return to not reading *Wired* itself on a monthly basis—while the "just try and read this!" layouts are long gone, the attitude continues to be annoying. Since I haven't been a steady reader, maybe I'm wrong, but my guess is that the pundits at *Wired* almost never actually admit to being wrong. (Did they ever back down from the "long boom" and "Dow 30K" predictions?) In this story, Gary Wolf *almost* backs down. He coauthored a cover story about PointCast and other push technology, arguing that Web browsers were about to become obsolete.

I experienced the PointCast wonderfulness for just as long as I needed to judge the monstrosity for a competition and remove the device and its software from my PC. That was way too long. Wolf does note that the story wasn't *quite* on the money:

> Browsers did not disappear. Instead, they became the world's standard interface for electronic information. PointCast, after spurning a buyout offer of more than $350 million from Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, went on to spectacular failure. Users ignored it, system administrators banned it, and the market punished it. Before long, *push* was a byword for *hype*.

But wait! Push is back, this time as RSS. I'll agree that there's a "clear parallel between the excitement of the PointCast days and the enthusiasm for RSS today," and wonder why Wolf doesn't recognize hyperbole this time around. Instead, the subtitle of the story is "Kiss your browser good-bye, again," and seems to be claiming that RSS *is* push.

But it isn't—and, with Bloglines and other browser-based aggregators being recognized as effective ways to handle RSS and avoid bogging down the internet with millions of RSS polling visits, RSS most surely doesn't threaten the browser. (Yes, I use Bloglines. No, I have no intention of becoming an "RSS bigot" and find the whole "do it my way or I'll ignore you" concept sad and self-defeating. I guess the privileged Boomer generation has passed on their aura of entitlement to their children, with a vengeance.)

So does this item belong in THE GOOD STUFF? Not really, but I've retired CHEAP SHOTS. And, I must say, while Wolf now claims that the earlier story was "weirdly prescient," he also admits that it was "terribly incorrect." He's half right.

The Details

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