Cites & Insights

Crawford at Large

Libraries • Policy • Technology • Media

Sponsored by YBP Library Services

Volume 7, Number 12: November 2007 ISSN 1534-0937 Walt Crawford

Bibs & Blather

Thanks!

As chronicled (sketchily) at *Walt at random* (walt.lishost.org), posts dated September 18, September 24, September 28, September 30 twice, October 3, all 2007, my odd public "job search" has ended well. Of the three conversations discussed, one resulted in a new core position I'm quite excited about. A second conversation means that YBP continues to sponsor *Cites & Insights* at least through 2008. The third conversation continues and may result in another (smaller) commitment. Between the first and the third conversations, it's looking as though *Making it Work* may yet emerge as a separate epublication, possibly with a different name.

The most important post related to the job search appeared on October 4, 2007 and is worth reproducing here in full:

Walt Crawford Named Director & Managing Editor of PALINET Leadership Network

Philadelphia, PA, October 2, 2007 — PALINET is pleased to announce the appointment of Walt Crawford as Director and Managing Editor for the PALINET Leadership Network. Crawford is an internationally recognized writer and speaker on libraries, technology, policy, and media, and the creator, writer and publisher of *Cites & Insights: Crawford at Large*, an ejournal on the intersections of libraries, policy, technology, and media published monthly since 2001. He also maintains a blog on these and other issues, *Walt at Random*. He was recently listed as one of the 31 most frequently-cited authors in library literature 1994-2004 (the only American writer on that list outside academic libraries.) Cathy Wilt, PALINET's Executive Director, comments: "We are thrilled to have Walt direct the development of this library leadership community of practice. The PALINET Leadership Network and PALINET members will certainly benefit from his substantial experience, not to mention his editorial wit and wisdom."

About the PALINET Leadership Network

Currently in beta release, the PALINET Leadership Network is an innovative online member service for library leaders designed to create a community of practice by sharing informative articles, forums on current issues, and collaborative discussions on cutting-edge topics. Designed as a wiki platform, the PALINET Leadership Network provides the latest innovations and most current leadership information in the library arena and beyond. It is an ideal vehicle for staying current with literature, blogs, and other leadership conversations, as well as a critical tool for mentoring staff.

Inside This Issue

About PALINET

PALINET, a member-owned and governed regional library network, was founded in 1936 and is one of the largest U.S. networks, serving 600+ members throughout the mid-Atlantic region and beyond. PALINET provides innovative training opportunities through its classroom and online distance education programs and live events and discounts on hundreds of library services from more than 80 business partners through its group purchasing program. For the latest information on PALINET, visit www.palinet.org.

That's the press release (no, I didn't write it, although I saw it before it went public). I'm writing this during the two-week break between turning in my key card and fob at OCLC RLG Service Center and starting in at PALINET. This issue will appear some time between my start there and my first trip for the job—to the PALINET Annual Conference in Baltimore at the end of October 2007.

Those of you who read *Walt at random* know all this already, and have been through six months of general hoohah on the blog as I wondered publicly what I'd do after 39 years as a library systems designer and programmer. I'd like to believe my personal unease during that period didn't reduce the quality of *Cites & Insights*. Looking back at the issues involved (June 2007 through October 2007), I'm entirely satisfied that you readers didn't suffer from my occasional malaise during the period. (I'm especially fond of *C&I* 7:9, the "On" issue, but you may prefer other issues such as CITES ON A PLANE 2: THIS TIME IT'S FOR KEEPS.)

Those of you who *don't* read *Walt at random*—if you're interested in the intersections between my personal life and work life, you should. I don't expect to have more to say about my former position, but I'm sure I'll be blogging somewhere about interesting aspects of the new position.

This blather is another way of saying *Thanks* (and it's the right month, too!). *Thanks* to several dozen of you who kept my spirits up during the early months in your email and post comments. *Thanks* to more than two dozen of you who posted a fascinating variety of blog posts about the situation. *Thanks* to those who did approach me with offers. A special *thanks* to Peggy Sullivan, who forwarded the PALINET posting—and, of course, to PALINET for taking a chance on me.

What Ever Happened To This Year's Liblog Extravaganza?

First there was PERSPECTIVE: INVESTIGATING THE BIBLIOBLOGOSPHERE (*C&I* 5:10, September 2005), an eleven-page set of notes and metrics on some 60 liblogs chosen from a group of 238. That essay got a lot of feedback—most (but not all) of it positive.

Then there was PERSPECTIVE: LOOKING AT LIBLOGS: THE GREAT MIDDLE (*C&I* 6:10, August 2006), a twenty-nine page study of 213 "midrange" liblogs, including a few from the previous year. I was and am proud of that one—and I thought about a plausible followup when I published the essay. I started tracking the liblogs in that issue: Checking once a quarter to see whether they were still around. My intent was to do a "lateral look at liblogs"—a comparison of 2006 and 2007.

That didn't happen. Instead, *C&I* 7:10 included a pre-announcement of a *book* on library-related blogs, *Public Library Blogs: 252 Examples*, fully announced in the next issue. (Go buy it: It's well worth the $29.50, and I'm a little saddened that some blog evangelists haven't even recognized its existence, much less its value as a way to show public libraries what might work for them.) Between job issues and the research, writing and other stuff required to finish *Public Library Blogs: 252 Examples*, the lateral look wasn't ready. Since I'm in the process of preparing an academic library followup, it won't be ready for some time.

I also recognized that I wanted to follow up not only the 213 blogs from 2006 but also nonoverlapping blogs from 2005—and a bunch of blogs that had been around but didn't quite make it into either survey. I still want to do that. It's clear that what I want to do won't work as a PERSPECTIVE, not even a whole-issue PERSPECTIVE. If it happens at all, it will be a book. Currently, the set of blogs I'd be looking at seems to total 359—but it's way too early to say what the final number will be.

A bunch of the 2006 blogs have disappeared. Others have changed names and URLs. A few seemed to disappear, then later reappeared. When (if!) I do the lateral look, I'll probably miss a few that have changed names. If the study happens, it should be interesting and possibly revealing.

Following Up and Feedback

First, two errors in the October issue:

- Dr. Andrew Burt's first name is Andrew, not David.
- Jennifer Macaulay's last name does not have an "e" in it.

PRISM

Just a quick followup on the PRISM essay from last issue. So far, Cambridge University Press, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, Columbia University Press, MIT Press, Nature Publishing Group, Oxford University Press, Pennsylvania State University Press, Rockefeller University Press and the University of Chicago Press have explicitly distanced themselves from PRISM, with Ellen Faran of MIT Press resigning from AAP PSP's executive council over the issue (James D. Jordan of Columbia University Press resigned from the council in August).

How many publishers have openly signed on to this "partnership" and how many groups other than AAP PSP are supporting it? None. Not one. Zero.

©3: Balancing Rights

Sometimes They're Guilty

Does RIAA overstate the extent to which filesharing reduces CD sales? Almost certainly. Are the statutory damages assessed for casual infringement and asserted by RIAA outrageous? You betcha. Does RIAA push for even more unbalanced copyright law? No question. Is it unreasonable for RIAA to expect universities to serve as the association's assistants in finding and punishing students who infringe copyright? Probably.

Should RIAA be spending more on tracking down *real* pirates—those who produce and sell illegitimate copies for profit—and a whole lot less on thousands of lawsuits against casual filesharers? Absolutely, in my opinion.

But let's get down to the real nitty gritty (to quote Shirley Ellis from 1963 and Ricardo Ray from 1994): Are RIAA's infringement suits always outrageous?

Note the catchphrase for ©3: "Balancing rights." Not *evading* copyright or saying, "It should all be free." *Balancing* rights. Given that, my answer to the question above is "Yes and no."

Yes, RIAA casts too wide a net. Yes, they've sued people who weren't infringing copyright. Yes, they're using hopelessly excessive claims for damages, aided by outrageous statutes. Yes, the whole RIAA process is unsavory (reasonably well documented at recordingindustryvspeople.blogspot.com, by no means an impartial site). Yes, it did my heart good to see one wrongly accused person get a court to instruct RIAA to pay her legal fees.

But I'm really not ready to see copyright dismissed as inconvenient. We need changes in what's considered fair use and in statutory damages—but that means changing the law, not ignoring it or expecting juries to "invalidate" it. And, as the title for this essay says, *sometimes they're guilty.*

Most of the time, RIAA grabs a few thousand bucks (commonly $3,750) from each infringer and lets it go at that. After all, very few individuals are about to pay the legal fees to stand up to a big well-funded corporate association. If the first try doesn't work, RIAA asks for a default judgment of $750 per "infringing" song. Sometimes that works, sometimes it doesn't. Once in a while, someone stands up. Standing up doesn't necessarily mean you're in the right. (Credits: Charles W. Bailey, Jr. did a fine job of gathering appropriate links on this particular case at *DigitalKoans*. Most of the quotations here come from those links. Thanks, Charles!)

Background and Trial

The case against Jammie Thomas is the first time an RIAA filesharing infringement suit has gone to a jury. Not that RIAA wanted that to happen. It filed a motion for summary adjudication, claiming no facts were in dispute. (Judges determine the law; juries rule on the facts. At least that's the theory.) The facts claimed not to be in dispute: That the record companies actually serving as plaintiffs own the copyrights to the performances in question; that those copyrights are registered; and that plaintiffs never granted the defendant any authorization to copy or distribute those recordings. The defendant's response says there's no agreement on those facts—and that the *critical* fact, that infringement took place, can't be proved. That's a brief summary and probably unfair to both sides. (One interesting issue: Given changes in ownership and the like, the *registered* copyright holders on older songs are frequently not the corporate bodies that currently claim copyright ownership—e.g., to give the simplest case, Sony BMG now claims ownership of all CBS, Inc. copyrights, but those are two different names.) Suffice it to say RIAA lost that one—the case went to jury trial.

I'm not making RIAA out to be a hero here. The group has done its damnedest to never actually *lose*: Walking away from cases where defendants fought them, for example. As *Ars technica* put it in a September 10, 2007 article on the RIAA motion:

> A loss at trial would be even more catastrophic for the RIAA. It would give other defense attorneys a winning template while exposing the weaknesses of the RIAA's arguments. It would also prove costly from a financial standpoint, as the RIAA would have to foot the legal expenses for both itself and the defendant. Most of all, it would set an unwelcomed precedent: over 20,000 lawsuits filed and the RIAA loses the first one to go to a jury.

This appeared to be a case with a sympathetic defendant: A single mother and Native American in Brainerd, Minnesota. Here's the big mean RIAA against a single mother who probably didn't do anything wrong and certainly didn't intend to infringe.

Except that her IP address was attached to a KaZaA account offering more than 1,700 recordings, with a user name she'd apparently used for years on several different accounts. Except that, "Not long after receiving a settlement letter from the labels, Thomas also had the hard drive in her PC replaced by Best Buy" (October 1, 2007 *Ars technica* coverage). Except that she *said* she'd replaced the hard drive a year earlier, before she received the settlement letter. (Don't we all replace our hard drives every so often?)

You can follow *Ars technica*'s coverage of the trial from Charles Bailey's October 5, 2007 post—not to give away the plot line, but the title's "RIAA wins in Capitol Records v. Jammie Thomas." The defendant's counsel questioned the linking of an IP address to the defendant, questioned that she'd actually seen a message accusing her of infringement before she had the hard disk replaced and attacked the use of usernames as "circumstantial evidence."

Things got *very* interesting when Sony BMG lawyer Jennifer Pariser testified. Pariser claimed that *ripping your own CDs* is theft:

> "When an individual makes a copy of a song for himself, I suppose we can say he stole a song." Making "a copy" of a purchased song is just "a nice way of saying 'steals just one copy'," she said.

Quite a few people pointed out the oddity of a Sony attorney claiming home recording for personal convenience was inherently theft. So much for the Betamax doctrine. Sony also sells recordable CDs, including "audio CD-Rs" *specifically* designed for copying music from other CDs—so is Sony itself aiding and abetting an activity its own attorney regards as theft?

Later, Pariser said RIAA is losing money on its legal campaign—and it has no idea how much damage it actually suffers from filesharing. RIAA never seeks *actual* damages (which could scarcely be more than $0.99 per demonstrated download); they always go after *statutory* damages of as much as $150,000 per song. Oddly, Pariser also claimed that the defense lawyer's estimate of the number of filed suits was "probably an overstatement," although that lawyer presumably did his homework.

Then Jammie Thomas took the stand. She admitted that she used the username in question on other accounts—even as the username on her Compaq. She admitted there was only one PC in her house when the KaZaA account was discovered. The plaintiff's lawyer established that none of her boyfriends knew the password for her PC. When Thomas was deposed, she said she ripped no more than six or seven CDs per day—but on the stand said she could have ripped more than 2,000 songs in a little over two days. She asserted that she'd never had KaZaA on her computer—but also said that she'd concluded in 1998 or 1999 that Napster was legal.

Given all that, I can certainly understand why the jury might reasonably conclude that Thomas was guilty—not only that she infringed copyright but also that she did so knowingly and attempted to conceal her actions. I suppose you *could* have a KaZaA account belonging to someone entirely different who just happens to have the same IP address as someone who uses that odd username for any number of other accounts—but it stretches credulity.

At that point, the big argument was over a jury instruction: Does "distribution" require proof that someone actually downloaded a song, or only that it was *available* for download? The judge originally used the first reading. RIAA asserts that availability on a filesharing network is sufficient proof of actual transfer. The judge finally amended the instruction: "the act of making available for electronic distribution…violates the copyright owner's exclusive copyright." Was the amended instruction correct? Different judges have taken different actions: There's no solid precedent one way or the other.

Brian Toder (Thomas' attorney) apparently recognized the case was falling apart. In his closing argument he said, "There are certainly alternative explanations, because my client didn't do it… Someone used her name and IP address. It's not impossible." Well, you know, any murder victim *could* have died spontaneously just before the shooting, thus making the accused innocent of murder—it's not impossible. And yet, murder convictions happen all the time—much less guilty findings using the lower standard required for civil verdicts.

Verdict and Reactions

The verdict was no great surprise and took the jury a mere five hours. Thomas was found guilty of willful infringement on all 24 songs that actually came to trial. The jury awarded $9,250 per song—a lot less than the possible $150,000, but enough to yield $222,000 in damages. According to one of the jurors, it took the jury only five *minutes* to decide she was guilty; the rest of the time was spent debating the appropriate penalty. That juror says at least two jurors wanted to assess the full $150,000 per song, while one held out for the $750 minimum. The juror, quoted in a *Wired News* story, said "We wanted to send a message that you don't do this, that you have been warned."

Is it likely that the RIAA will collect $222,000 from a single mother? Of course not.

Is it likely that the RIAA will continue its overbroad campaign, emboldened by this victory? Probably, and that's a shame, all things considered.

Was the defendant guilty? There, it's hard to argue with the jury—as long as the instructions to that jury stand.

News.com posted "Four reasons why the RIAA won a jury verdict of $220,000" on October 5, 2007:

1. The RIAA was able to match a username and IP address with Thomas. Thomas' widespread use of the same username certainly didn't help matters.

2 and 3. The jury instructions, already discussed.

4. "Copyright law is harsh." The *minimum* damage the jury could have applied is $750 per song.

The piece suggests RIAA would be smart to offer Thomas a settlement of around $22,000, which would "still let the record labels wave around a pretty big club."

Early reactions

Bush administration officials equated the Thomas case with piracy and applauded the outcome. Congressman Rick Boucher, one of the leading voices for balanced copyright, thought the damages were "obviously excessive" (I agree)—but he also noted "I have no sympathy for people who engage in illegal peer-to-peer file sharing."

Jammie Thomas called the amount of the judgment "ridiculous"—and still asserts she's innocent. She basically said she lost because she didn't have the money to afford an FBI analyst to prove that someone else hacked her IP address (and username?).

I'm sure some of my friends and readers are outraged by my stance here—which is that, although the amount is certainly excessive, Thomas was almost certainly in the wrong. EFF takes what I consider an unfortunate (but consistent) view:

> Despite today's verdict, tens of millions of Americans will continue sharing billions of songs, just as they have since Napster let the P2P genie out of the bottle nearly 8 years ago. Every lawsuit makes the recording industry look more and more like King Canute, vainly trying to hold back the tide

EFF seems to feel that filesharing must be OK because so many people do it. By that logic, we really should abolish speed limits and legalize adultery.

I don't see lots of commentary saying the verdict was wrong—although many people (including Declan McCullagh, who believes the verdict was right) agree the amount is absurd. He says, "The problem isn't the verdict. It's the penalty." I agree.

More reactions

Bailey posted more reaction links on Sunday, October 7. One particularly interesting one is at *Ars technica* (a good source for coverage of these issues), "How the RIAA tasted victory: a perfect storm which might not be repeated," posted October 7, 2007 by Eric Bangeman. Bangeman, who was at the trial, says in part:

> It's reasonably clear that the RIAA chose to head to trial with a case it knew it would win. Across the board, the RIAA's case was strong. Every significant allegation that the labels made could be backed up, including the "tereastarr" screen name, the ownership of the IP address, and the presence of a single device behind the IP address. (The only assertion that the defense was able to cast significant doubt upon was that the music on Thomas' hard drive was copied from another hard drive and not ripped.)…
>
> Perhaps the most damning bit of evidence was the username for the KaZaA share flagged by Safe Net, tereastarr@KaZaA. Thomas had a 13- or 14-year history of using that name online for everything from e-mail addresses to Match.com profiles. RIAA lead counsel Richard Gabriel hammered that point home to the jury, showing screenshots of her Match.com profile with her picture on it as well as the Windows XP Start menu on her PC, both of which used the tereastarr moniker.
>
> Speaking of her PC, the RIAA also made sure the jury was fully aware that Thomas' Compaq Presario was password-protected, and that she was the only person who knew the password and was therefore able to log onto the machine. Thus, the question of identity fell strongly in favor of the RIAA.
>
> In his attempt to raise doubt that the tereastarr flagged by SafeNet was indeed Jammie Thomas, her attorney Brian Toder raised the possibility that there might have been a "computer party" going on. If that was the case, anyone could have been plugged into Thomas' cable modem and sharing music over KaZaA.
>
> There was one problem with that theory: Charter's records showed that the same device was plugged into the cable modem in the months before and after the KaZaA share was flagged. One of the exhibits introduced at trial showed a four-month snapshot of the DHCP leases for Thomas' account. In each case, the MAC address for both the cable modem and the device connected to the cable modem were unchanged for the entire period in question. There was no evidence that Thomas used a router, which means that the same PC was likely plugged directly into the cable modem the entire time. The KaZaA identity, and now the connection used, appeared to point to Thomas.
>
> The RIAA also made a point of showing that much of the music in the KaZaA share was likely downloaded from P2P networks. They did this with the help of Mark Weaver of SafeNet, who walked the jury through the company's investigative techniques and explained the significance of MP3 file metadata to the jury…
>
> Beyond the hard evidence, the RIAA was also able to convince the jury that Thomas was a tech-savvy individual. She testified that she has a BS in business administration from St. Cloud State University, the course work for which included a number of computer courses, and that she was "proficient" in the major Microsoft applications. Her job in the Department of Natural Resources for the Mille Lacs band of Ojibwe also involves a fair amount of computer use, and she has done some online gaming in the past. All in all, it was a

> picture of someone who knew what she was doing when sitting in front of a PC.
>
> For the jury, we believe these issues were critical. For a jury of mostly non-technical people, the issue of identity was strongly decided in favor of the RIAA…
>
> With the RIAA having successfully tried a case, there's now a template for how to handle future cases that go to trial. First, the RIAA will need to make sure that the evidence is as exhaustive as possible. Second, the labels will need to be able to make a concrete connection between the screen name on KaZaA (or whatever application is in use) and the human being at the keyboard, something they were able to do with Thomas. If the defendant doesn't have a wireless access point or a router, so much the better…
>
> This victory is not a sign that the RIAA will take more cases to court. A win in battle does not equate to winning the war, and too many dicey questions were either sidestepped or ignored in this trial for it to be truly indicative of how all such cases will play out.

Ed Felten is worth hearing on issues like this. Here's part of what he had to say in an October 5, 2007 post at *Freedom to tinker* (www.freedom-to-tinker.com):

> People often argue that the industry has only weak evidence when they send their initial settle-or-else demand letters to users. That may well be true. But in this case, as the trial loomed, the industry bolstered its case by gathering more evidence. The lesson for future cases is clear. If the industry has to go to trial with only the initial evidence, they might not win. But what end user, knowing that they did download illegally, will want to take the chance that more evidence against them won't turn up?
>
> The most striking fact about the Thomas case is that the jury awarded damages of $9250 per song to faraway corporations.. That's more than nine hundred times what the songs would have cost at retail, and the total of $222,000 is an astronomical amount to a person in Jammie Thomas's circumstances. There is no way that Jammie Thomas caused $222,000 of harm to the record industry, so the jury's purpose in awarding the damages has to be seen as punishment rather than compensation.
>
> My guess is that the jury was turned off by Thomas's implausible defense and her apparent refusal to take responsibility for her actions. Litigants disrespect the jury at their peril. It's easy to imagine these jurors thinking, "She made us take off work and sit through a trial for this?" Observers who hoped for jury nullification—that a jury would conclude that the law was unjust and would therefore refuse to find even an obvious violator liable—must be sorely disappointed. It sure looks like juries will find violators liable, and more significantly, that they can be convinced to sympathize with the industry against obvious violators.
>
> All of this, over songs that would have cost $23.76 from iTunes. At this point, Jammie Thomas must wish, desperately, that she had just paid the money.

That last sentence is a little off, since one key to the verdict was Thomas' making the songs available for *others* to download; she may very well have owned all the songs on CD. That third paragraph is particularly interesting, however: Juries may not love the RIAA but they rarely nullify laws.

It's nonsensical to fine Jammie Thomas $220,000 and hope she will or should pay that amount. It's possible RIAA will lose more good will because of the case, although I'm not sure how much good will RIAA has left to lose at this point. It would be lovely to see changes in the law such that statutory damages for noncommercial copying made some kind of sense.

But I'm less ready than EFF to just say, "Everyone does it, so it's OK." In fact, everyone does *not* do it—by most estimates, no more than 10 to 15% of Americans download music illegally. Compared to speeds on a typical highway, that makes music-lovers pretty law abiding. The law's out of whack. That does not automatically excuse breaking the law. Apparently a Minnesota jury felt the same way.

The Story Continues

Thomas is appealing the decision based on the jury instruction that said making songs available on a filesharing network is sufficient proof that the file has been shared (thus infringing copyright). The appeal is pretty clearly not entirely a personal matter, as Thomas wrote this on her blog: "This would stop the RIAA dead in their tracks. Every single suit they have brought has been based on this making-available theory, and if we can win this appeal, they would actually have to prove a file was shared."

I'm impressed that a single mother with a modest salary who's clearly being abused by the RIAA apparently has the legal resources to mount what will surely be an expensive challenge. I find it a little hard to believe that she's simultaneously claiming she never did it and spending money on an appeal that says what she claims not to have done was legal anyway.

I'm not surprised EFF says the jury instruction was "wrong." EFF argues that distribution doesn't apply to digital transmissions at all—that it requires that a physical object change hands—and that, even if it did, a copyright owner must prove that someone actually downloaded from someone else's computer. EFF will file an amicus brief. As noted already, the record is mixed. A big part of me hopes that the appeal succeeds—that "making available" isn't held to be equivalent to "distributed." But it's tough on both counts.

Jammie Thomas' attorney is also raising another interesting argument in a plea to the judge: The statutory damages established in 1976 are so excessive as to be unconstitutional. It's not a crazy notion: The Supreme Court has overturned punitive damages using a guideline that anything in excess of nine times actual damages is excessive. The *minimum* statutory penalty for infringement is $750; that's 757 times the actual damage for a single unauthorized download of a tune, as compared to the download cost of $0.99 at most sources. The RIAA says that any such theory of excessive damages would make "it economically unsound for any copyright owner to seek to protect its copyright interests." I find that a little hard to swallow; surely commercial piracy can be punished based on probable actual damages. On the other hand, I'd be surprised if the courts accepted the argument.

Oh, as to EFF's claim that the law requires physical distribution? The relevant clause says the owner has the exclusive rights "to distribute copies or phonorecords of the copyrighted work to the public by sale or other transfer of ownership, or by rental, lease, or lending." I guess EFF is saying "copies" can only mean "physical copies." Interesting.

Trends & Quick Takes

The Trouble with The

How's this for news: A librarian winning the Ig Nobel prize for Literature. That happened this year and Glenda Browne (of Blaxland, Australia) managed to attend the ceremonies. The award was for "The definite article: acknowledging 'The' in index entries," which appeared in *The Indexer* 22:3 (April 2001).

It's a four-page article—actually just over three, plus references. It's also a *legitimate* article—Browne explicates some of the bedevilment caused by The as an initial word. When "indexing" *Cites & Insights*, I drop "The" in every case—and that sometimes yields slightly odd results. (I used to invert them, but that's even stranger.) But…

Where does The Hague belong? (One answer: Use the *proper* name of the city, Den Haag—but I jest.) It belongs in the T's. And if you're indexing first lines of poems, all those lines starting with "The" also go in the Ts—but not corporate names. Or do they? Los Angeles Symphony goes in the Ls, not the As…see The Hague. Isn't this fun?

Browne's discussion of "The nature of 'The'" is excellent and might itself justify the Ig Nobel—you might laugh but you'll also think. Browne suggests double-indexing as a solution and offers reasons for doing so—and also reasons for ignoring the The.

If you use most PC-based systems that sort (for example, music organizers), there's a pretty good chance you'll find The Beatles and all those other groups down in the T's—but some systems are clever. Sometimes.

I love the last sentence: "Similar arguments apply to 'A' and 'An' but these are beyond the scope of this article." Indeed.

The Next Email

Robert Scoble has decided that Twitter is "the next email," that it "will change the way business communicates." He says so in the September 2007 *Fast Company*. Twitter's "poised to make email feel as antiquated as the mimeograph." And doing enough tweeting can "strengthen your brand" (you *do* have a brand, don't you?).

How can Scoble be wrong or deluded? After all, he has 4,000-plus Twitter "followers" who get his frightfully important 140-character "blasts." And where would those 4,000 people be without intimate knowledge of what Robert Scoble is eating or thinking (in 140-character chunks) or…? He now has "professional intimacy" with a few thousand of his best buds.

Oh, and wouldn't Twitter be a great way to *market things*? Scoble wonders why Proctor & Gamble isn't monitoring his tweets (or blasts) about the child his wife is expecting and sending him ads for diapers. Yes, that's right: Scoble's disappointed that he's *not getting ads* through Twitter. "There's an untapped gold mine in Twitter…" And in three years, *everybody* will be Twittering as something "we must do just to participate in the heartbeat of business." Right.

Tomorrow's Technology?

Once in a while *PC Magazine* loves to wow us by showing us what's going to happen two or three years down the line, based on visits with their favorite research labs. So it is in a July 17, 2007 article—and along with the article there's a timeline for 13 technologies "guaranteed to *change the world* by 2020" (emphasis added). Of course, that's not really subject to challenge: If I walk an extra mile this afternoon or meditate for 10 minutes, that changes the world. It's not what most people mean when they use "change the world," though.

The hot new future technologies? "IMAX at home"—software that will allow you and a group of friends to stack six or twelve data projectors and use them to create a huge ultra-high-resolution image. Now that's world-changing technology, right? Aren't you aching to invite eleven other dweebs over so you can game on a 16 foot by 9 foot screen?

Then there's Soap, the "midair mouse" from Microsoft Research—"essentially a wireless optical mouse surrounded by a fabric hull." The inventor seems excited about the idea that this creates a mouse you can use in the living room. "Or in the classroom. Or even on the subway." Wow! Finally a pointing device that can be used in a classroom! (OK, that's snarky. This device looks strange but possibly useful in some circumstances. Heck, I think the Wii remote looks pretty strange too, so what do I know?)

Next? Topological quantum computing. I've just told you all that I understand about this one, even after reading the article.

Content-centric networking from Xerox PAR, "a bit like BitTorrent, but on a grander scale."

Another research lab is right on the verge of having an artificial brain, true AI. This time it's IBM's Almaden Research Center "just south of San Francisco." Hmm. I know *PC Magazine* is in New York City. I know much of the media thinks San Francisco and LA are the only cities west of Chicago. But a technology magazine *ought* to recognize the existence of Silicon Valley and that San Jose is more important for computing technology. The Almaden Research Center is 15 miles south of San Jose International Airport. It's in San Jose, not "just south of San Francisco." That's like saying a place in Philadelphia is "just south of New York"—except that San Jose is *larger* than San Francisco Never mind. This group's seeking a "universal cognitive mechanism" using a "massively parallel cortical simulator." So far, they claim that six seconds of computing on a Blue Gene/L supercomputer with 8,192 processors, four terabytes of memory and 1Gbps bandwidth can simulate one second of mouse-level thinking—assuming, of course, that you can completely measure thought processes.

How about those sure-fire near-term world-changing technologies? A "real quad-core CPU" from AMD, as opposed to that multichip product from Intel. The first OLED TV, tiny and expensive. WiMAX, offering high-speed connectivity "everywhere" (in a few major metropolitan areas, that is—if you're in the outbacks of Wyoming or South Dakota, don't sign up just yet). And many more. Including a few familiar stories, like cars that automatically avoid accidents. Displays built into your clothing (the motivations for which I still haven't heard). Oh, and HDTV being "obsolete" by 2016 because someone will turnout a 7680x4320-pixel UHDTV with "22 speakers of surround sound." Presumably *introducing* one such beast (I'm thinking how many of us are ready to place 22 speakers in any room in our house…) instantly makes HDTV "obsolete." Ain't technology wonderful?

People-Powered Search

Yahoo! proudly announces it's going to improve search by having lists of results carefully prepared by people who know what they're doing. This should be a real breakthrough.

Oh, wait: That's what Yahoo! *used* to do—before it became a portal centered on a web search engine (one that seems significantly improved of late).

No, this time it's not Yahoo!—it's Mahalo. And it's from Jason Calacanis, so *how can it miss*? Did not Calacanis put together a bunch of blogs and sell them to AOL for big bucks? Now he's got people making $35,000 a year (in Santa Monica, California, where you can buy a nice little 1,200 square foot house for $750,000 or so) to prepare hand-crafted search results for the most popular search terms. Using Google as a source. If your Mahalo search doesn't yield a Mahalo list, it gives you a result anyway. From Google. Now, how up-to-date will these handcrafted result sets be? And why would we regard them as better than the old ODP and Yahoo! Directory and other directory projects?

I read the six-page article on Mahalo (and Calacanis) in the September 2007 *Fast Company*. I learned enough about Calacanis to know I'd rather avoid him on the road (he's one of those folks who uses his Blackberry while driving, since I guess cell phones aren't sufficiently distracting). I've read some well-informed bog commentaries on it as well. I certainly didn't learn anything that would make Mahalo a sure-fire winner. But you never know…

Battle of the Platforms?

The title is promising: "Heavyweight battle! PC vs. Mac." That's in the September 2007 *The Perfect Vision*, and the article's supposed to be an objective head-to-head comparison of home media computers. You note something odd immediately: The iMac is $2,000 with a 20" display—while the HP Pavilion Media Center m8120n pitted "against" it is $1,500—with a 22" flat-screen display. That's a pretty big differential, particularly given that the HP has 3GB RAM rather than 2GB, a quad-core Intel CPU instead of a dual-core (and a little faster to boot), two 320GB hard disks instead of one 250GB hard disk, a TV tuner…

Higher speed, 2.5 times the storage, bigger screen, much better multitasking abilities? None of that matters, says Michael Penwarden. The "seductive, beautiful simplicity" of OS X beat out Vista and Windows Media Center—mostly, as far as I can see, because there are no troublesome *choices*. Penwarden suggests that behind the surface of the iMac is "a magical land populated by elves and unicorns where the images you see are brushed on the back of the glass by fluttering fairy wings" as opposed to the "Terminator-esque tangle of chips and wires" he'd expect to see inside the HP.

Toward the end of the article, things become clearer. Penwarden is a firm believer in the One Best Way, the idea that choices make life difficult. The *lack* of choices is his strongest argument for the iMac. He admits the HP can do more (it has a built-in TV tuner and DVR capabilities, for example), but "peace of mind" matters more than that. He suggests that using a PC means "you're one errant click away from tumbling into the purgatory of tech support calls or blinking command prompts." Yep, those blinking command prompts: Sure do see a lot of those with Windows XP and Vista. Whereas the iMac is "a beautiful piece of equipment that does such a stellar job of anticipating your desires..."

All is revealed at the end of the article: "Michael Penwarden is the former editor of *Macworld Magazine* and a former technical editor of *Windows Magazine*." In other words, he's a full-time Mac cultist, just the right person to do an objective comparison. (As for that dual-platform editorial experience: *Windows Magazine* ceased in 1999, back when there *was* an actual DOS and command prompt beneath Windows.)

There's nothing wrong with preferring Apple equipment and software. There might be something wrong with writing comparisons when you're so obviously biased toward the Apple Way.

Phone Ladies

There's an odd and somewhat sad story in the September 2007 *Fast Company* about the "village phone program" that helped Muhammad Yunus win the Nobel Peace Prize. You may remember the program: GrameenPhone provided microloans to impoverished people (mostly widows) to buy cell phones and rent them on a call-by-call basis to neighbors who can't afford telephones of their own. The first such phone was in Bangladesh and the proprietor started bringing in serious money ($800 a month, which in Bangladesh really **is** serious money). Laily Begum, that first one, is now worth more than everyone else in her village combined—but no longer thanks to the phone rentals.

"In Bangladesh today, the only one making real money on GrameenPhone's wireless service is… GrameenPhone." For a simple reason: Too many people have their own cell phones. While the "phone ladies" could make anywhere from $750 to $1,200 a year in the past (according to one account, there are 280,000 such phone ladies), the average profit per operator in 2006 was down to $70 for the year. As many as one in seven Bangladeshis owns a cell phone. The company's still pushing the program—but it appears that it only works while a region is still filled with the poorest of the poor. Bangladesh may no longer fit that definition. Maybe this isn't such a sad story after all.

The Good Old Days

The blogger at *InfoSciPhi* (infosciphi.info) got a little peeved about some email forwards, leading him to write "The 'good old days'? What about the 'good new now'?" on May 7, 2007. He notes tidbits from one of the emails about how wonderful things used to be:

> Your Grandmother and I got married first… and then lived together.
>
> Every family had a father and a mother.
>
> We were before gay-rights, computer-dating, dual careers, daycare centers, and group therapy.
>
> Our lives were governed by the Ten Commandments, good judgment, and common sense.
>
> We were taught to know the difference between right and wrong and to stand up and take responsibility for our actions.
>
> We listened to the Big Bands, Jack Benny, and the President's speeches on our radios…
>
> And we were the last generation to actually believe that a lady needed a husband to have a baby. No wonder people call us "old and confused" and say there is a generation gap... and how old do you think I am? This man would be 60 years old.

Well, old man, I'm 62, and I'll admit that post makes *me* confused. There were certainly families without both parents when I grew up. My mother worked for a while, and there were quite a few other dual career families. I seem to remember some non-Christians around who didn't feel that the Ten Commandments have legal force—and I also seem to remember graven images, adultery, theft, untrue gossip (false witness against thy neighbor), and *for sure* people coveting other people's possessions. Tell me nobody looked with envy at their neighbor's shiny new car, and I'll ask what universe you lived in.

What else? The era of the big bands was in decline 60 years ago—but that's enough of that. Whoever wrote that email is a little confused, but you know, you get to be 60 and the brain cells don't function very abado tgowhv09 well any more. Blagfarb. Xsnrt. Where was I?

Here's part of what the blogger has to say (it's an excellent post, **well worth reading**):

> Whenever I hear someone begin to express sentiments like these, I always wonder why they can't focus on the aspects of life that have actually improved. You *never* hear them mention that the civil rights movement has made great strides in granting equal rights to persons of color and women or that a great many diseases that were near epidemic proportions in the "good old days," like polio, bubonic plague, and cholera, have been all but eliminated.
>
> You won't hear a person of this disposition expressing how labor conditions and worker's rights have dramatically changed for the better, that no matter how bad our current education system is today it is more available and functional than it was then, or that communication has improved to the point that people living in even the most remote places in the world can receive news and phone calls and access the internet.
>
> The welfare of children and the elderly has improved dramatically, medical advances have added years to the average person's lifespan, and Communism is no longer a threat, but more of an anachronism.
>
> Overall, in the areas listed below, societal progress has increased across the board.
>
> * health, life expectancy
>
> * level of education, literacy
>
> * access to information
>
> * average wealth
>
> * democracy, political and individual freedom
>
> * safety
>
> * equality between classes and between the sexes

But what about those Values we've lost? You know, back 60 years ago when there were no corrupt politicians, no drug addiction or alcoholism? *Those days didn't exist*, as the blogger points out—any more than divorce, adultery or children born out of wedlock are new phenomena. One difference: Many people aren't quite as judgmental as they used to be.

Here's some of what this blogger *hopes* he'll recognize when he's old enough to start spouting off about the good old days:

> I think I will have the wisdom at that point to realize that generalizations like these can often hide our deepest fears and might even hold sub-currents of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and elitism.
>
> Even worse is the lack of insight to fully perceive that life is a constant turmoil of positive and negative; that we must constantly fight the darker side of human nature, the forces of nature, and ourselves to insure that change and progress are positive.
>
> That we use must our knowledge and wisdom to understand others and consider that their views might have validity, that to see the big picture while looking back at how far we have come is the greatest gift we have at our disposal.
>
> Learn from the mistakes of the good old days and maybe the "good present" or "happy now" will be somehow just as appealing.

There are a few things I miss about the good old days. When I was college age, the University of California, Berkeley (and, I believe, most comparable schools) was so well-funded by the state that my education was pretty close to free—college fees were in the low three digits each year. Yes, I worked part time after my freshman year; yes, my parents contributed a few thousand dollars each year (and "few" is the right word)—but I also graduated with zero loans. I miss that possibility for today's students.

Otherwise? I'm on board with today, and plan to stay that way tomorrow.

The Wisdom of the Crowd?

Given that I'm unlikely to do a full-blown Net Media piece on folksonomy and the like, at least for a while, some semi-related items I think are worth noting:

- *Inherent vice* (www.inherentvice.net) has a brief March 1, 2007 post, "Infozen: The dumbness of the crowd vs. collective intelligence." It's a graphic accompanied by some disjunctions between "collective intelligence" and the "dumbness of crowds"—the latter being areas in which individual intelligence does a better job. For example: "collective intelligence" is the new ideas created from the pool of photos on Flickr; "dumbness of crowds" is expecting that group to actually create and edit a photo. CI: getting lots of input. DoC: "blindly averaging the input of many people and expecting a breakthrough."
- Elaine Peterson at Montana State University offered the brief "Beneath the metadata: Some philosophical problems with folksonomy" in the November 2006 *D-Lib Magazine* (www.dlib.org/dlib/). She makes a potent argument against folksonomy as the *sole* scheme for organizing information; I'll point you to the article rather than commenting on it.
- Nicholas Carr talks about "Amazon's unseemly tags" in a May 29, 2007 *Rough type* post (www.roughtype.com). What unseemly tags? Oh, for one French "coming of age" film there are "child nudity," "infant nudity," "nymphette,"

"bare butt." And if you click on one of those tags, you get—well, you *used* to get "a neatly organized list, sometimes going on for many pages, of other movies that users have tagged with the same label." Some of those lists are going to be a tad unsavory, naturally. He notes the potential problems for Amazon in making it easy to find lists of movies featuring "child nudity"—and figures out that those keywords are mostly imported from IMDb (owned by Amazon). His conclusion: Commercial site owners need to track user-generated content—including anything that gets pulled in from elsewhere. "What they say about sexually transmitted diseases seems to apply equally well to data in the Web 2.0 age: You're not just sleeping with your partner; you're sleeping with your partner's partner." Incidentally, when I (reluctantly) checked, these keywords are still there—but they no longer yield lists. One assumes Amazon is doing some filtering behind the scenes.

Typography

Speaking of things I may not get around to for a while, there's that special typography issue of *C&I*—which, if I did it now, might include a how-to on building a good basic "book" template for Microsoft Word. Meanwhile, if you're even a tenth the type geek that I am, you should look for the May 2007 *IEEE Spectrum* and "The technology of text" by Kevin Larson. (You may be able to find it online, but I couldn't retrieve the article in early October 2007). Larson is a member of the Microsoft Advanced Reading Technologies Group and tells us why it's so hard to read from the screen and what's being done about it—including ClearType, a technique that bothers Apple and Adobe but strikes me as eminently workable. You'll definitely want to print out the article, I think. Pay particular attention to the figures, including the last one (which shows the same paragraph rendered twice onscreen, once using a new version of ClearType that can assign subpixel spaces between letters).

There's even a little mythbusting in the article. Remember the paragraph that began "Aoccdrnig to rscheearch at Cmabrigde uinervtisy, it deosn't mttaer what oredr the ltteers in a wrod are"? According to *later* research, the primary points of the paragraph are dead wrong.

Quicker Takes

Dan Costa's July 17, 2007 *PC Magazine* column discusses the reasons he spies on his kid (his term), even though saying so might jeopardize some friendships "and possibly my American Civil Liberties Union membership." That's nonsense: ACLU isn't going to oust someone for monitoring their own teenage son's activities, within reason. I find the final paragraph particularly interesting, as it marks a distinction between family responsibility and government intrusiveness:

> I want the power to spy on my kid. But I don't want anyone else doing it. And I don't want anyone tracking me, either. Not my wireless carrier. And not my government. As a father, I have to look over Emmet's shoulder, but I don't need Big Brother looking over mine.

- Should a new thing work either "the way it's supposed to" or in a sharply different way? Andy Havens comments at *TinkerX* on a post by Bill Higgins that argues it should—that web applications shouldn't look like desktop applications, etc. He disagrees. So do I. As he says, "Time and time again, I've used new software that broke some existing UI rule or convention…and surprised me pleasantly. When done well." Havens does agree (as do I) that adding glitz to an application for the sake of sameness is a bad idea. On the other hand, the original post has a statement I really have to wonder about: "I prefer [Gmail b]ecause over the past twelve years, my mind has developed a very specific model of how a web application should look and feel…" Sorry, but that's a crock. *Past twelve years*? Anyone remember the web in 1995? Do you really believe most web applications look and feel the same way in 2007 as in 1995? (Havens counter-metaphor: In this case, he thinks a mail app should look like traditional mail apps, so Zimbra would be more comfortable. Dunno if I agree, but it's at least as valid a comparison.)
- Iris Jastram at *Pegasus Librarian* has a great post on May 18, 2007 (pegasuslibrarian.blogspot.com), if you happen to be a Blogger blogger who writes long posts and wouldn't mind Firefox users printing them out and reading them. She recounts Steve Lawson's work to come up with a solution—one that gives clean printouts without disturbing the online style. If you're in this group, **go read it**! The title: "Beating rocks together: Print styles for Blogger."
- There's an informative (if challenging) series of posts at *Good math, bad math* (scienceblogs.com/goodmath/) under the "Basics" category. I printed off posts on the basics of statistics, for example one on normal distributions that shows why mean and median can mean very different things (and why the "average" can be so misleading when a distribution isn't normal)

and another on standard deviation, that calculation that can help you determine whether distribution *is* reasonably normal and how broad a normal distribution curve is. But there's also a good short post on syntax and semantics and others worth considering. Given my own experiences trying to cope with people's innumeracy, I also appreciate his Basics post on innumeracy (April 16, 2007) and how widespread it is.

- Phil Bradley reports (in a June 3, 2007 post) on a Search Engine Land report indicating that overlap among the major web search engines is decreasing—which means you really should be using more than one. At least for the first page, less than 1% of the results in the tests were the same across all four engines—and 88.3% of the results were unique to one search engine. Which four engines? The ones you should be using: Google, Yahoo!, Live and Ask. Not necessarily in that order, although that's the order of popularity.
- I like Lisa Belkin's May 31, 2007 New York *Times* article, "Time wasted? Perhaps it's well spent." Belkin notes the ways we "waste" time at work (and at home) and offers evidence that we're wasting more time *because* we're working harder and longer—and that we need respites from focused work. For writers and anyone else for whom thinking is a big part of working (which *should* include all white-collar occupations and most other occupations, for that matter), maybe "the hours away…are the time when the real work gets done." Bob Kustka suggests the problem isn't "only" doing three or four hours of concentrated work a day—it's the idea that you're supposed to spend many more hours than that.
- My Conference extravaganza didn't deal with "unconferences" and other novel forms of conference…not because they're not interesting and worthwhile (they are), but because I haven't had much experience with them (although the Charleston Conference has always had the "Rule of Two Feet," which is that you are *expected* to get on your feet and leave when a particular session isn't meeting *your* needs). This was brought to mind by a June 20, 2007 *Out of the jungle* (outofthejungle.blogspot.com) post extolling unconferences. My quick reaction: "Great, but…" Unconferences make loads of sense—but not, I believe, as wholesale replacements for other kinds of conferences. This is another classic "and not or" situation. As for the impending death of megaconferences such as ALA Annual: People have voted with their feet and charge cards. This year's Annual Conference had record attendance. Next question? (Not that things couldn't change—but I'd be surprised if they change radically while I'm still young enough to attend conferences.)
- There was a multipart conversation in at least five different liblogs in early August 2007 about being "the best." I gathered some of the posts, but I'm not going to comment on them. I sense either a post or an essay on my own attitudes, which favor vectors rather than goals: I want to be *better* at things I care about, but don't much care whether I'm "the best." I'll never be the best writer in the world; I believe I'm a better writer now than I was ten years ago (but could be wrong), and hope to be a better writer in five years than I am now. If I'd had a set of goals, most of the quantifiable ones (for professional achievement, at least) would have been exceeded some time ago, and I think I'd find that discouraging: Where do I go now? But that's a quickie; more, maybe, later.

Net Media

Thinking about Blogging

When you're reading tips for blogging and comments about blogs, it helps to start with a good sense of why *you're* blogging. There are many reasons to blog, but most tips seem to assume you're aiming for a huge, influential audience or plan to make money through ads. Ten reasons I can think of to have a blog:

- You're in a class or workshop that requires starting a blog.
- You've read that every librarian (or library) should be blogging—and who are you to doubt the wisdom of social-software gurus?
- You'd like to jot down notes on some aspects of your work, or your life, or a hobby or some area of expertise, and think a few other people might find those notes interesting.
- You want to start conversations on certain topics of concern to you.
- You have things to say that you believe aren't being said as well as you can say them.
- You need to document a specific project and a blog seems like a good way to do it.
- You want to improve your writing and think a blog will provide practice and feedback.
- You want to be famous.
- You want to be known as an authority.
- You want to make money.

In the first two cases, there's a good chance you'll write a handful of posts and stop, unless it turns out you have other reasons to keep going. That's OK; you probably used a free platform and didn't make extravagant promises for your blog. In the last three cases, well, lots of luck. Miracles can happen.

The five middle cases are where the fun is and where I believe most lasting libloggers fit. Think about your own blogging (present or future) and where it fits. Knowing the answer (which can change over time) will help you judge blogging commentaries—such as the first one here.

General Blogging Issues

The title is "Top ten blogging tips from a novice blogger"; the post is by Avinash Kaushik, posted October 2, 2006 at *Occam's razor* (www.kaushik.net/avinash/). It's a tight three pages, expanding these ten tips—which, as with any blogging tips, are more *or less* applicable depending on your motives for blogging:

> 1. Nobody cares about you, they care about what you can do for them
> 2. Have a personality, reflect your core beliefs, be honest, have fun
> 3. Blogging is a very serious time commitment
> 4. Pick a subject matter you are passionate about and that you are good at
> 5. Respect the intelligence of your audience
> 6. Blogs need constant promotion, participation and evangelism
> 7. Being "digg'ed" is great exposure but traffic builds gradually over time, one person at a time
> 8. Have goals, whatever you want them to be
> 9. Be nice, save your hidden agendas for other uses
> 10. Nobody will read my blog

The expansions are well worth reading, and appear in the more typical #10-to-#1 order. Thinking about my own blog and most typical liblogs, I'd say tips #3 and #6 may be wrong for most of us: Blogging needn't take much time and *certainly* doesn't require promotion or "evangelism" in many cases. If you're out to make your blog a Force, maybe so. If you're out to converse with a few people with similar concerns, not so much. In Kaushik's commentary, he makes that point clear: "If you want to have a popular blog then you need to be a[n] evangelist of the blog, you need to be something of a humble self promoter." Many of us don't necessarily want a "popular" blog—we just want to reach an appropriate audience, which might be tiny.

I wish more bloggers—and more of those who tell us *how* to blog—would pay attention to #5. People *can* read multisentence paragraphs and multiparagraph posts; even big words work once in a while.

Reading the explanation for #3, it appears to be a matter of your blogging style and writing abilities. Consider this paragraph:

> I only do two posts a week (late Sunday night and Wednesday night). Yet according to my wife (who keeps track of my life better than I can) I am putting at least 15 – 20 hours a week into this. The breakdown is six or eight hours in writing and refining the posts themselves and around the same time in replying emails from readers or replying to comments on the blog or doing web analysis of my blog data or reading and participating in the ecosystem.

I don't spend 15-20 hours a week on *Cites & Insights*—well, maybe some weeks, but not most. *Walt at Random?* Maybe two hours average, four in special cases. I can't *imagine* spending six or eight hours writing and refining two posts; if I did, I'd give up blogging as a bad use of my time. Different people work differently, to be sure, and I'm sure there are libloggers who send more than ten hours a week carefully polishing each word of their posts. I'm not one of them—and I suspect most of aren't in that refined crowd.

I also disagree with #8, but that's partly because of a personal orientation: I favor vectors over goals, at least partly because it's too easy to reach goals and then wonder what to do. You can't reach vectors—they're always stretching out ahead of you.

Otherwise, I think the tips make sense—starting with #10, which is another way of saying "there's always room for one more blog, but don't expect miracles."

Who is this person and how much of a novice was he at the time? The latter question's easy enough: The blog began in May 2006, so he really was a novice. But it started out with polished essays reflecting extensive background—"expert" blogging even if by a novice. He has a substantial audience; a quick Popuri.us check on October 5, 2007 shows 507 Bloglines subscriptions and 7,636 Technorati links; his Technorati "authority" is 1,038 and he ranked 2,153 at the time. He mostly writes about use analytics—and that's also what he does for a living, currently as Google's "analytics evangelist."

More blogs, less weight

That's the title of Nicholas Carr's November 10, 2006 post at *Rough type* (www.roughtype.com), discussing a Technorati "state of the blogosphere" report.

> One thing struck me… It wasn't that the total number of blogs in the known world had leapt once again, to something like 837.4 trillion. Rather, it was the rapidly shrinking presence of blogs among the top media sites

> as ranked by Technorati. To put it in popular terms, blogs are being squeezed out of the short head and pushed ever deeper into the long tail.

He looks at Technorati's list of 35 "most influential and authoritative media sites" and sees that 45% of them were blogs in October 2004, down to 37% by March 2005, 31% by August 2005, 11% by February 2006—and, in October 2006, 6%: Two of 35 slots. Where three of the top ten were blogs in October 2004, the current total is zero. For that matter, only 12 of the top 100 sites are blogs.

> It's worth remembering that the last two years have been a time of remarkable growth and even more remarkable publicity for blogs – almost certainly the peak on both counts. Yet, still, blogs' share of the top media sites – the sites that set the public agenda—has been shrinking rapidly. Even as the blogosphere has exploded in size, its prominence in online media has been waning.
>
> What this seems to indicate is that the mainstream media is successfully making the leap from the print world to the online world. The old mainstream is the new mainstream… The real A List of online media is made up almost entirely of the sites maintained by mainstream media companies. Bloggers seem fated to be, at best, B Listers.

Seth Finkelstein's comment nails a point that has struck me about the supposed A-list: They're mostly professional media, not the blogs that mere mortals like you and I produce. Engadget? An online magazine in post form. Boing Boing? Same thing. Looking at the 100 most popular *blogs* according to Technorati, I get down to #15 before I see something that looks more like a blog than like a bloggish professional publication. Finkelstein also notes that Technorati changed its algorithms in September 2005 (it now measures only the last six months), making earlier and later comparisons difficult. He raises an interesting question that's hard to answer:

> The blogger question I'd really like to know is whether the Big Headers have more audience/influence in absolute terms or not. That is, do they have a relatively smaller slice of a much bigger pie but much larger in absolute value (like 0.1% of a big public company rather than 10% of a small startup), or have they been pushed out entirely by big media (VisiCalc, WordStar)? Obviously, the answer can be different for different people.

I could say "none of this applies to libloggers," but I'm not certain that's true. On the other hand, one commenter offers this quandary: "I don't know if the blogosphere as a whole has less influence on the public opinion than the mainstream media as a whole." I think I know the answer to that. I believe the "blogosphere" considerably overestimates its relative impact on public opinion as a whole—that the mainstream is still, by and large, the mainstream, just as the audience is still, by and large, the audience.

Unintended consequences of content portability

While this two-part conversation appeared in liblogs, it's not specific to library issues. The title above appeared on Meredith Farkas' November 12, 2006 post at *Techessence.info*. Farkas discusses the ease of moving content with RSS and other tools, including the ease of mixing content from different sources to create a new source. Sometimes, that ease leads to content being reused in undesired and possibly illegal ways. Two key paragraphs:

> While most people syndicate other people's content for educational/informational purposes, there are also people who use the content of others for their own profit. Spam blogs--or splogs--resyndicate content from popular Websites to drive people to their blog where they usually have set up Google AdSense or some other pay-per-click scheme. They use the popular content to draw traffic to their own site so they can make money. This would be considered a commercial site and would violate many people's Creative Commons Licenses. But how do you get a splogger to take your content down? There may be no way to track down the creator of the splog and most individuals are not going to jump through the hoops of seeking legal recourse.
>
> Another interesting issue arises when someone uses your intellectual property in a way that does not violate your license, but you don't like the context in which it is used. For example, librarian Michael Sauers has a Creative Commons license governing his online photos. Recently, a PBS blog used a photograph of his -- with the appropriate attribution -- in an article about cell phones and banning them in libraries. While the article appeared to be in support of banning cell phones, Michael does not agree with that stance. This is a fairly mild example, but it could easily get more serious. What if an anti-death penalty individual's Creative Commons-licensed photo is used on a pro-death penalty Website? Would it look like the individual is promoting something they don't agree with? This is a risk we all take when we allow our content to be used by others.

These are two different issues (as Farkas recognizes)—one legal, one *possibly* ethical. Violating a Creative Commons license is copyright infringement (unless the violation constitutes fair use): That's a legal issue. I'm guessing that people who set up splogs aren't particularly concerned with legality or ethics.

The second paragraph is never a legal issue and frequently not an ethical issue. Fiona Bradley commented on that in a November 13, 2006 post "Derivative, works?" at *Blisspix.net.* She also discusses some of the problems with current copyright law, but here's the relevant note for this particular discussion:

> This is an issue that has been around for as long as we've been able to critique, cite and discuss the work of others. When people cite, we don't get to choose whether they are quoting us to support their argument, or to provide a point of criticism. Or, they may selectively quote and make it seem that we support or oppose an issue.

Quoting out of context may be (and frequently is) unethical. But that wasn't the issue with Michael Sauer's photograph. He put it out there in a manner that allowed legal reuse. There is no Creative Commons sublicense that says, "This can be copied, but only if I agree with the argument you're making." Nor would fair use generally allow such a limitation. To do so would be the death of argument in many cases—"No, you can't quote me if you're going to disagree with me!" Actually, RSS generally *improves* this situation, as it is less likely to result in out-of-context selection.

The personal and the professional

I'm discussing two of Dorothea Salo's *Caveat lector* (cavlec.yarinareth.net) posts from late 2006 that may not really belong together—and I'm a little embarrassed, as the second post is one I really *should* have included in PERSPECTIVE: ON THE LITERATURE (*C&I* 7:9, August 2007).

The first, "Liminal librarianship," appeared November 20, 2006. In it, Salo discusses the fuzzy boundaries between work, off-the-job professional, and "other" life when it comes to blogging. Salo considers *CavLec* a personal blog—but there have been periods (in this case, October and November 2006) where almost all the posts relate to her work and the profession. That happens. I anticipate doing more of that in my new position, when it feels right.

> This leads, however, to some tricky social/professional negotiations. It might seem obvious that an existing blogger is the choice to head up a library's blogging initiatives—but what if that blogger is profane, coarse, prone-to-fly-off-handles me? What library wouldn't think twice? Even though I believe I've demonstrated to MPOW's satisfaction that I know where the appropriate boundaries are, the mere fact that CavLec is a hybrid beast creates perfectly legitimate worries about whether I'll forget in future.
>
> Moreover, what happens if I say something professionally, socially, or politically beyond the pale here? Is MPOW obliged to take notice? Is MPOW obliged to take action? What about any professional societies I happen to belong to? Remember, CavLec is theoretically and actually my space—but I've assuredly muddied the waters by talking shop here; CavLec is a liminal space, sprawled over both sides of the personal/professional fence.
>
> Restricting ourselves to the biblioblogosphere just for a moment, I note a range of responses to this difficulty. The purely professional blog, written in purely professional voice, as the blogger's unique public face is perhaps the most obvious, because it is the easiest and most welcomed. Nearly all biblioblogs about open access take this approach, though the degree of editorialization varies from almost-entirely editorial to link-and-comment to just links.
>
> Other bloggers split their blogging between professional and personal blogs. Still others (among whom I place myself) split between public blogging and (semi-)private blogging, often at a site that offers access controls such as Vox or LiveJournal.

Salo discusses a DSpace situation, where logging a conversational channel among developers didn't happen partly because people felt that logging might chill conversation.

> Clearly separating personal from professional spaces makes life easier for everyone; employers can genteelly ignore the personal, while employees can extract whuffie from the professional, and since the line is roughly the same as in regular non-virtual space nobody's expectations are violated and nobody's nose has to go out of joint. Why do I have a LiveJournal? Because I force enough noses out of joint as it is; I'm all for MPOW not even seeing a few things, rather than forcing themselves to genteelly ignore them!
>
> The thing is, the whole "genteelly ignore behavior in liminal spaces" model is at best a figleaf and at worst an illusion. As a professional librarian, I can't ignore liminal spaces. Can you? Does all the information you need come to you through the strictly professional literature? Really? Do you feel not the slightest twinge of worry about your service population turning to liminal spaces for their information needs? (Then you're the weirdest librarian I know. Google sprawls over all sorts of spaces.) Have you not even once considered how to place your library within liminal conversation spaces? (Again, if you haven't so much as considered it, I wonder where you've been the last two-three years.)

There's more in this post that's worth reading. As Salo notes, "liminal spaces" carry costs in freedom of behavior; we've seen signs of those costs. (She's been bitten. So have I. So, I suspect, have most people who blog with any degree of frankness.)

> We can't shut our professional selves out of liminal spaces; we impoverish both ourselves and the profession thereby. We can't expect to treat them as purely personal spaces, either, which means a lot of unpleasant uncertainty and second-guessing, as well as regret; we all behave badly sometimes, and it's frustrating to see venues where folks used to cut us a little slack turn into the same guarded, buttoned-down places we used the slacker venues to *escape from*.

> At least we can talk about it. We can do that.

Why put this here rather than later, under library-specific stuff? Because these issues aren't unique to librarianship. Any field where people blog has similar issues, although some may have better-defined norms for separating personal and professional.

Come December 12, 2006, Salo posted "Blogging and the 'social journal'"—and I'm cherry-picking in this case, ignoring much of a thoughtful post. (See Farkas above: Sometimes people quote in a manner that *changes* context, even with the best intentions.) Briefly summarizing the thrust of the post, Salo thinks about her professional network and how it works…and notes that while a journal *article* may be read, valued and recommended, "the journal is not the unit of recommendation." I think she's right—and in earlier days it may have been more true that "the mere fact of publication was sufficient recommendation." In 1976, I was thrilled to say, "I had a refereed article published in *Journal of Library Automation*" (now *Information Technology and Libraries*). Now, if I wrote scholarly articles, I'd point to the article itself, with its inclusion in a first-rank journal being (at most) secondary to the content of the article.

Salo discusses journals and community—noting that peer-reviewed journals really can't build communities both because there are just too many of them and because double-blind peer review tends "to obstruct loyalty of authorship and readership." I'll suggest that traditional non-refereed publications *can* build connections to some extent: Standing columns form connections, as I've seen from time to time. But not so much as blogs—and here it gets interesting, since *Caveat lector* is less conversational than most liblogs, given that Salo doesn't allow comments. Excerpts:

> Even considering the potential disadvantages of oversharing…blogging stacks up well against journal publishing as a tool for integration into a given professional community. And I don't even have comments enabled here!
>
> I hear a lot about journal "branding," but I don't think community is a brand that journals (including society journals!) are working for these days, usually touting "quality" above all other considerations. Maybe that's how it's had to be. I don't know; I wasn't in the business very long, and I was never privy to this kind of strategic discussion. I don't know that matters need to continue this way—but that's up to societies and journals.
>
> Journals are losing face to other knowledge-distribution mechanisms because of speed differences, access differences, quality-of-service differences, cost differences, social-networking differences, all sorts of differences. What they've kept, kept a stranglehold on in many disciplines, is the perception of career advantage: "if I publish in journal X/a peer-reviewed journal/any journal, it will advance my career."…
>
> What if blogging, performed well, represents a viable alternate route to career advantage? Sure, no academic in a field that requires journal publications is going to survive tenure hearings without them (for now). But if blogging introduces a young scholar/professional to more people who can help that young scholar or professional advance than does slogging through one or a few more journal articles, I expect young scholars and young professionals will figure out for themselves the most profitable avenue of action. And if tenure continues receding out of reach for young scholars, journals have even less to offer; visibility and networking will inevitably become a better career tool…

Go read the post. It's excellent, making an interesting case that big pricey journals may go away not because they lose subscriptions but because authors find better ways to communicate. That's a fascinating discussion, one I don't need to get in the middle of (and shouldn't, as I'm not qualified). The points Salo's making ring true to my "On the Literature" commentary: For me, for now, the most relevant literature in the field is no longer in the refereed journals. Maybe that's not how it should be; maybe it *can't* be that way in hard sciences. Maybe I'm deluded. But that's how it is. And it's absolutely clear that I'm not alone.

Blog growth stalling: Some reasons why I nearly quit blogging

That's the title of an April 27, 2007 post by Jason Kaneshiro at *Webomatica* (www.webomatica.com/wordpress/). He notes numbers showing that more blogs are becoming inactive and comes up with an active blog count of 15 million. That may be low, but that's not the point. Then there's this curious sentence, given the blog on which it appears: "I think any blogger would agree: it's not exactly a cake walk to blog for the long term."

As with most statements about blogging, my first response is "that depends what you mean by blogging"—followed by "what does long term mean to you?" I've been writing *Walt at random* for more than 2.5 years, which I do *not* consider long-term. *Librarian.net*, *Shifted librarian*, *Scholarly electronic publishing blog*, *Infomusings*, *Caveat lector*, *Catalogablog*, *eclectic librarian*, *The aardvark speaks*, *EngLib*, *Confessions of a science librarian*—those and others have been around for a while (more than five years at this writing). Kaneshiro? "I've been at this for under a year, and several times thought about throwing in the towel." I can't think of any definition that would call him a long-term blogger—but I'll go along with part of the next sentence: "Surely an inactive blog means the writer found something better to do." ("Something better" may not mean "something more pleasurable"—sickness and family crises trump blogging even more definitively than more interesting hobbies.)

I like Kaneshiro's list of reasons *he* almost quit blogging (with expansions and how he got past them):

- Nobody reads my blog
- Writing quality content is challenging to do over the long term (apparently Kaneshiro feels you have to post daily to be a serious blogger)
- Lots of time is spent not writing (reading, commenting, etc.)
- I get too much spam
- Too many rude comments
- Hits are easy but consistent traffic is harder
- The money just isn't there
- The blogosphere is a fish bowl

"The money just isn't there." Well, that's certainly true. He says "I've heard it takes about a year of consistent blogging to make a substantial amount." For many of us, blogging will never earn *any* direct revenue no matter how long we do it—and I'm naïve enough to believe that in the long run, those who are blogging to make a buck will fail, as readers will desert them. (I'm almost certainly wrong there for the top of that crowd, but probably right for everyone else who's doing it for the dough.)

Some of them are a little silly. He admits Akismet catches his spam, so the fact that spamments considerably outnumber legitimate comments shouldn't be an issue. Spam Karma 2 does the same. My numbers are worse than his (he cites 7,000 spams in comparison to some 1,000 legitimate comments; Spam Karma has caught more than 23,000 spams in comparison to some 2,200 legitimate comments on *Walt at random*)—but dealing with spam takes me very little time or trouble.

Reading the comments, I begin to wonder just how many people *do* blog because they think it's a way to make money or think it's the In thing? Apparently there are bloggers who know they have nothing original to say (one apparently just reposts Digg content); several seem burdened by the need to blog every day without apparently asking *why* they think it's necessary to blog every day. That's sad.

Andy Havens commented on this post in "Blogjoy" on May 5, 2007 at *TinkerX* (www.tinkerx.com). I'm almost reluctant to excerpt Havens' post, as you lose the flavor of his writing—and Havens is a writer. In this post, he thinks about blogging and why people write. He supposes (correctly, I believe) that many people blog for the same reasons people keep journals—and Havens is one of those who never kept a journal. His overall thought on Kaneshiro's post:

> A long, well thought-out blog post about how you almost quit blogging is like when beautiful people complain about how they used to have damaged hair or skin problems.

He also notes the oddity of a blogger who's apparently become high profile talking about not *always* being high profile. He does a number on Kaneshiro's motivational bullets (which I didn't quote), noting that "Think long term rather than short term," "Be prepared for the long haul," and "Don't expect instant success" all say the same thing—and that "Don't quit your day job on day one" is bizarre given that most bloggers never make a living (or a dime!) from blogging. (Havens also notes the oddity of a post about not getting real comments—which has 39 real comments attached to it.)

Indirect blogging

That's not the post title. Mark Lindner used "A plea to those who output their del.icio.us stuff to their blog" for this August 22, 2007 *Off the Mark* post (marklindner.info/blog/). The post runs a little more than two pages (followed by several pages of interesting and sometimes argumentative comments), but could be shortened to the first two-word paragraph:

> Please don't!

Now that Mark's out of the way, we'll move on to…well, no, there's a little more to the post than this straightforward request. (If there wasn't, I'd do a followup post on *Walt at random*, "A plea to those who send their Twitter tweets to their blog," having the same two-word post body.)

Lindner isn't saying you shouldn't make del.icio.us posts public. He's not even saying you couldn't have a blog devoted to them—and he'd be interested in reasons for doing such a blog. But he's not thrilled when blogs he already reads suddenly have this stuff showing up.

He deals with the natural response: You're probably reading via aggregator and can just ignore the del.icio.us posts.

> Well, ignore may well become the operative word. The issue is that, despite what some think, dealing with all of this stuff does take real physical and cognitive labor. The physical labor is not generally the kind that makes you sweat, but it is the kind that may very well lead to overuse injuries.

You can avoid overuse injuries with the right equipment, but it's still a nuisance. The cognitive issue is different and it's one I'm thinking of as I realize it's time to start trimming the Bloglines list:

> On the cognitive front, just like you, I have more than enough to slog through and I try to subscribe to information sources from people whom I truly want to read. This is not to say that I am guaranteed to want to read every word that you write. Certainly not. But if I have kept your feed around then a conscious decision has been made that I find what you post of value, at least generally.
>
> Adding your del.icio.us stuff to your general blog is a guarantee that—for me—you have just significantly impacted that decision in a negative manner.
>
> If you rarely add stuff to del.icio.us then I probably will barely notice. But if you add stuff almost as frequently as you post….

Like any sensible person, Lindner says you should do what you want—it's your blog, after all. Then again: "I also realize that generally part of the point is to have folks read it. So, be sure to consider whether this additional content also serves as a useful and appreciated bit of content for them." For him, del.icio.us posts almost never are.

For me, Twitter cumulations are *never* useful or appreciated—to the point where I've come very close to unsubbing one blog, even though I find the substantive posts interesting and worth reading (maybe the more so because I frequently disagree with them). Tweets are bad enough on their own; when they're clearly one side of some conversation with another Twitterer, they're even worse. I'm not the only one who feels that way. The second comment (from Karin Dalziel) says so up front; a bit later, Jennifer Macaulay notes that she "especially find[s] the Twitter dumps excruciating." Kirsten notes that she's unsubscribed from blogs just for this reason—and Angel's glad to see it's not just him.

In the end, of course, Mark Lindner is no more telling you what to do and not to do than I would. (Yes, Mark, I basically skip over your "what I've read this week" posts as well—but there's only one a week so it's no big deal.) What comes out, though, is the flipside of the curious finding that blogging popularity seems to rise in the absence of posts: I suspect more and more of us are starting to unsub blogs when we find the noise:signal ratio getting too high. "Blogging" that isn't really blogging generally reads as noise.

How to: Put your feeds on a diet

Speaking of unsubbing, here's an interesting post, written by Fiona Bradley and posted October 2, 2007 at *librariesinteract.info* (that's the URL), a group Australian liblog. She offers some suggestions for paring email overhead and social software excesses, but I'll focus on her suggestions for "cutting shamelessly" from your aggregator (she says to export the OPML file first, just to be safe):

> Dead blogs
>
> Blogs that are no longer relevant to your current work
>
> Newspaper feeds—I find these are the most difficult to keep up with. They update several times per day and can quickly spiral out of control.
>
> Blogs or feeds that update too frequently. They are often not much more than linkblogs—causing you to spend more time reading as you click through to each link.

Blogs or feeds that update too frequently—how times have changed, from the days when frequent updating was supposed to be essential for a blog! What does Bradley suggest keeping?

> Blogs with few subscribers—because you won't be rereading their comments on everyone else's blog
>
> Analytical, thoughtful blogs—they're worth the time
>
> Blogs outside librarianship, or with a higher ratio of original content
>
> Feeds you actually read, if you use Google Reader use the statistics feature to work out which you read the most

I think that first one particularly bears repeating (and I'll second it). As for the last—well, with Bloglines at least, there are *dozens* of posts that I read fully and appreciate without ever clicking on the post or the blog. How could Bloglines or Google Reader tell that I'd read the post? (If you expand blogs individually, that's different—but I *always* touch on every blog with new posts every day I use Bloglines. If I can't be bothered to even glance at a blog's posts, it doesn't belong in my aggregator. Period.)

Blogs, Libraries and Library People

Marylaine Block writes "A Human Voice" in *Ex Libris* 292, December 8, 2006. It's about library blogs. It's worth reading, as she offers a range of library blog examples and some of their virtues. And yet…

> One reason I like blogs so much is that the format virtually compels you to talk like a person, not like the official voice of the library. Most official library prose is careful, neutral, restrained, and, not to put too fine a point on it, boring beyond belief... The grayness of our prose is odd, considering that librarians are readers who know what sparkling prose looks like. And all the odder when you consider that most librarians are really pretty interesting people.

Would that it were true—that blogging really did compel a human voice. It doesn't. It's just a lightweight publishing mechanism. As I was preparing *Public Library Blogs: 252 Examples*, I encountered dozens of wonderfully human voices (including some of those Block cites)—but I also encountered a fair number of blogs that consisted of dry announcements. As I write this, I'm halfway through the set of academic library blogs I'm studying—and I'd have to say that, so far, probably a majority of them are sets of news items in reverse chronological order, in typical official prose. That's because so many of them *are* news items, nothing more: The posts aren't signed and don't represent any particular voice.

Do the most effective blogs have more personal prose? That depends on your definition of effectiveness. Personally, I believe so—but I can certainly see the uses of impersonal blogs. Sorry, Marylaine, but the medium itself doesn't compel a human voice any more than using Microsoft Word compels correct spelling or grammar or effective writing.

More excerpts:

> A library blog does need to be approached with commitment, as a library service that like any other requires daily or at the very least weekly attention—people won't click on a blog that rarely gets updated (though to some extent that can be mitigated by making the blog available as an RSS feed). Somebody has to keep supplying content.
>
> One way to do that is to require several library staff members to contribute regularly to the project…
>
> Finally, a blog is a place where your community can talk back to you, because blog software automatically permits comments. The fact is, people don't like top-down communication: we all want to talk back. Allow your users to contribute to the site, and you'll have a nice informal feedback mechanism to find out what your users think about your existing services, website, collections, and recommendations, and what they'd like to see added or changed.

That middle paragraph (the statement is followed by an excellent example of a multicontributor blog, *MADreads* from Madison Public Library in Wisconsin) is troublesome: *requiring* staff to contribute to a blog is rarely the best way to get lively, personal, interesting blog entries.

As to the first and third paragraph—well, during the period March-May 2007, most public library blogs examined had slightly *less* than one post a week (the median was 12.0 posts in 13 weeks). As for comments, blog software only automatically permits them if you configure it to permit them, and many libraries don't. Even when you do allow comments, it's wishful thinking to assume your community will use the feedback mechanism: The median number of comments during that 13-week period was *zero*, with only 118 of the 252 blogs having any comments at all (and 25 of that 118 having one comment over 13 weeks). Thirty out of 252 averaged at least one comment a week; almost one-quarter of *all* comments for all 252 blogs were gaming-related comments on one blog. Again: The audience is still mostly the audience—and while inviting public feedback and participation is certainly worthwhile, librarians should not be too surprised or disappointed if it doesn't happen very often.

On the other hand, when I wrote "would that it were true" earlier, I meant it—I do believe library blogs can be more effective when they're more human. Jill Markgraf was one of the students in this year's spectacular Five Weeks to a Social Library course. She posted "Blogs: it's not so much a change in technology as a change in thinking" on February 16, 2007 (go to www.sociallibraries.com, blogs, participant blogs, Jill Markgraf). She wonders whether libraries may be a "little too ga-ga over this blog-ability" and thinks she sees one reason why:

> Maybe more than anything else blogs have changed the way we think about communicating with our patrons. When I look back on years of working on library websites, I am flooded with memories of committee meetings where we spend untold hours choosing individual words, placement of words, images, buttons, colors, sizes, etc., to have everything **just so**. Blogs free us up a little bit to be more, well, real. The blogosphere seems just a little bit looser, a little more relaxed, a little less perfect, more natural, more conversational, more spontaneous. And maybe that in itself makes us a little more inviting, responsive, interesting and human. Maybe that's the big deal. (The word "ga-ga" never would have made it past the web committee).

This is a fine description of what blogs *can* do for a library's communication (and sometimes conversation) with its patrons—and when that happens, it can be a big deal

To blog or not to blog

Sharyn Heili posted this at *Libraries and librarians rock* (sharynheili.wordpress.com) on December 18, 2006. It's mostly a list of "great reasons" that libraries should blog—seventeen in all, including these:

> Meet users where they are in their space, which after all is our space too
>
> Generate conversation/discussion/dialogue with customers and increase awareness of library
>
> Highlight parts of the library's collection and staff's expertise
>
> Get the word out–tell the library's story
>
> Create trust–staff blog freely and informally
>
> Partner with city/county/museums/chambers of commerce and tourism

We can go back and forth as to whether blogging connects with "customers" in "their worlds," but that isn't the most interesting item in this post. I was fascinated by the following statement, attributed to Robert Harbison of Western Kentucky University Library: "Blogging has become not just fashionable but mandatory in today's business world."

Really? *Mandatory*? So every small business must be blogging, not to mention every major corporation? Hmm. I wonder where the local hardware store's blog is… Sorry, but I just flat-out don't believe this statement. I suppose it makes a good preface to asserting that libraries *must* have blogs (which Heili doesn't say in so many words, but she comes close), but it's just not true. If you believe *Wikipedia* (it's sourced in this case), 5% of Fortune 500 corporations have external blogs—a very odd version of "mandatory." (The source actually says 8% as of October 2006—and, through a link, a list showing *ten* of the Global 1,000.) For that matter, there's good reason to believe *some* "blogging businesses" aren't really blogging: One of the comments on the list of blogging Fortune 500 corporations is from a professional business writer who has "been contacted several times by firms seeking to outsource their blogging content."

Want something more up to date on how mandatory blogs are in corporations, given that there are millions of corporations in the U.S. alone? The NewPR Wiki (www.thenewpr.com/wiki/) has a CorporateBlogsList, international in scope and open to nonprofits as well as traditional corporations. As of this writing, it includes some 140 organizations, all the way from IBM to the 92nd Street Y. Even if you add the 280-odd names on the CEOBlogsList and assume that each of those CEOs represents a corporation not on the other list (clearly not true, and for this list CEOs also include heads of universities and associations), you'd have a little over 400 corporations *worldwide*. Is that one-tenth of one percent of actual corporations? Probably not.

I'm certainly not saying libraries shouldn't blog; I'd scarcely be putting in serious time on the two books if I believed that. I am saying that libraries should not feel *compelled* to blog—and that "mandatory" is a strange word to use in this case.

Oroberosity

This note could appear in the "general" section *or* in the library section—but it may be easier to address within a relatively small field such as librarianship (although I'd guess librarianship has more than its share of bloggers relative to the size of the field). Rachel Singer Gordon posted this at *The liminal librarian* (www.lisjobs.com/liminal/) on March 18, 2007. In part:

> A couple of the respondents to the alternative careers survey mentioned that they keep up by reading library blogs, but added parenthetically that they find the well-known blog/bloggers to be too inbred, too repetitive, and too busy patting each other on the back. I've heard people say this before, and I'm wondering how prevalent this feeling is.
>
> I usually like seeing several bloggers take on a given issue, because each tends to have different insights and bring in different links. But, I also try to subscribe to a variety of blogs, as well as to less well-known blogs, to avoid becoming my own filter. While I dearly love my Bloglines… I try to be aware of the dangers of confirmation bias as I note myself jumping to the bloggers that I most agree with and skimming over those I don't.

She asks what we do to overcome our own "confirmation bias" and whether we still read the "big name" bloggers. I'd say there are two related issues: confirmation bias (where we read things that support our own viewpoints) and the echo-chamber effect (where a group of bloggers are busily patting each other on the back).

I'm not sure the comments responded to her question. Dorothea Salo asked for a list: "Who are the big-name bloggers in libraryland?... I can't answer for sure until I know who they are." My studies were suggested as a rough guide (Salo correctly pointed out that the larger 2006 study deliberately excluded the most "popular" blogs—and didn't name those excluded). A handful of blogs was mentioned more than once, with tiny differences between the two mentions. Since then, to be sure, there has been one external effort to identify the biggest liblogs and an internal effort to identify favorites.

Given my curious position (and Dorothea Salo's) within some of those lists (not listed in the handful mentioned in comments on this post, but fairly high in the two recent efforts), I can legitimately say that not *all* widely-read bloggers are inbred or form an echo chamber. Do some of them? I leave that exercise for the readers. As for confirmation bias—that's nearly impossible to track externally and I'm sure it happens to some extent. But it's clear that the hundred or so most widely read libloggers don't always agree on everything; there's a healthy amount of dissension on most issues within that odd crew.

Nor, for that matter, are all libloggers taking part in a common cause—or, if we are, it's a cause we define in many different ways. Laura Crossett wrote "bibliobloggers at the round table" at *lis.dom* (www.newrambler.net) on March 21, 2007. She'd like to think that libloggers constitute a group, all "working toward the same end, or at least a similar one." Skipping a *lot*:

> We want better libraries. We want better librarianship. We want to discuss our ideas with others who may have wildly divergent ideas but who are similarly fired up about them. We want to be around others who are as passionate as we are. And, perhaps frivolously but perhaps most importantly, we want to be colleagues, comrades, friends….
>
> The biblioblogosphere isn't working with a list of demands or even a list of points of unity. We're just firing rockets into the night, hoping they ignite something and that that ignition causes a conflagration, and that that fire is the kind that does not simply destroy but also makes way for new things to be born. I'm eager and interested to see what will happen.

I believe there are a few (a *very* few) libloggers who don't really want better libraries or better librarianship, who mostly want to cry doom and celebrate the downfall of libraries. I've learned to unsubscribe from those blogs. I don't look for confirmation, but I'm impatient with that level of desperation or hopelessness. I can count the number of such blogs I've encountered on one hand and have fingers left over; that's a very good thing.

The fading blogging community?

Horst Prillinger had a "Comment" on March 28, 2007 at *The aardvark speaks* (homepage.univie.ac.at/horst.prillinger/blog/) about changes in blogging patterns—not directly related to the "weight" issue, to be sure. Part of what Prillinger notes:

> A paper that I'm currently writing has me thinking about weblogs again. One, the diminishing posting frequency on weblogs all around me… has led me to believe that the golden days of weblogging might be over. Sadly, I'm not saying this as somebody who jumped the hype, but as somebody who started a website only to discover that he was actually writing a weblog..
>
> Anyway, in this paper I am trying to single out strategies for using weblogs in libraries, despite the fact that I see their importance dwindling. Today, I wrote some 1200 words on the significance on comments and trackbacks, and noticed how their significance seems to have changed.
>
> Even Dave Winer, the controversial semi-guru of weblogging changed his position between 2003, when he claimed that comments were a defining element of weblogs, to 2007, when he says that they're not really all that important.
>
> So what about the interactivity, the writer-reader communication interface? Was the fact that a weblog allowed on-the-spot discussion of a topic not one of the things that made weblogs different from the rest of the web-based applications?
>
> I am wondering what sidelined comments (and trackbacks, by the way) so much, and the main suspects seem to be two things:
>
> First, comment/trackback spammers, who forced many bloggers to switch off or at least restrict access to the comment and trackback functionality…
>
> Second, wikis and other forms of interactive web publications may have taken over this functionality from weblogs as they seem to be more suited for discussion.
>
> But overall, the interconnection between weblogs seems to have become looser. People have been removing or reducing blogrolls, comments are often not available, and as a result the often cited "community" quality of weblogs seems to be waning away. I guess part of the reason for people losing interest in their own blog is that they are finding fewer interesting other blogs due to this symptom.

I offered the first reply (Prillinger explicitly invited responses and arguments). Nearly all of what I had to say back in March:

> I'm going to suggest an alternative, at least as far as library-related blogs are concerned. I think they may be in the process of becoming *more* relevant--because they're less "hot" and the frequency of posts is declining.
>
> Let me amplify that a bit (noting that I'll save your post and followups, because this is an interesting question that deserves thought). I'm seeing a general decrease in quantity, but I think I'm also seeing a general increase in quality. Maybe I'm fooling myself, but I think not. That also involves a newer breed of bloggers, people who would have either not started or given up earlier because they just weren't ready to do a post a day or whatever--but who do have interesting, thoughtful things to say once a month or once a week or when the thought strikes.
>
> As for comments--well, there too, I'm seeing fewer "you go!" comments and, I think, more comments that further serious discussion. At least I think I am.
>
> As for trackbacks, I agree there: Spam pretty much destroyed the usefulness. I never allowed them and I've never missed them.

Another commenter suggested that increased use of aggregators may be one reason there are fewer comments—and that makes sense. I probably miss some interesting comments because I only click through to posts (when full-text aggregation is available) if I plan to save them for later reading, and I'm not likely to click through to comment on an otherwise-marginal post.

Five reasons not to blog

That's the title on Chris Harris' April 1, 2007 article at *School Library Journal* (www.schoollibraryjournal.com)—but I think it would be better titled "Five bad reasons to blog," since that's what these are. The discussion's charming, but I'll just give the five reasons (noting that the third may be truer for school libraries than other library situations):

- "I want to give them a piece of my mind!"
- "Oh, the stories I could tell"
- "I think I can find some time at school…"
- "Nobody will find out that it's me"
- "It's OK, I will keep it private."

Look up the whole article; it's nicely done.

Blogs and work

How do your blog and your work relate to one another? I'd guess that most of us who blog at home, don't blog anonymously or pseudonymously, and work for a living think about that at one time or another, *particularly* when we blog on work-related issues. If you meet all those criteria and have never thought about the blog-work relationship, well, maybe you should.

Dorothea Salo kicked off this particular discussion with "The library manager and the librarian blog," posted August 14, 2007 at *Caveat lector*. Salo's supervisor knows about the blog but hasn't called work attention to it and neither has Salo. "I wouldn't have it any other way." She doesn't say others should follow her example, but "I do think everyone ought to at least *think* about it."

> Sure, it's possible to write a blog of sufficient quality to merit inclusion on a tenure report or annual evaluation. Especially in libraryland, though, that means putting a hefty muzzle on things. Don't you dare write anything personal that someone else might get angry or squicked at…And don't have opinions on matters libraryish that differ too much from your boss's. Asking for trouble, that.
>
> And when you get in trouble, no one will defend you…
>
> Go there if you want to. I sure wouldn't.
>
> But just to look at the other side of the glass for a moment, imagine you're a library manager and you find out one of your reports does this really killer blog. Shouldn't you bring it under the library fold? Good publicity, 2.0ishness, and all that?
>
> No. No, you really shouldn't. No matter how professional that blog is, it is a function of the librarian and not the library. (After all, you don't get to keep the blog should your report leave your library, do you?) Treat it as you would any other publication by one of your reports. Reading it is totally kosher. Talking to your report about it at the water cooler is fine. If you regularly make note of your librarians' professional activities, it's probably all right to point out one or two posts that got quoted a lot in a meeting or a librarian-activity report (but I'd ask first, honestly I would). It's fine to ask that person to talk about blogging tools, or to work on a duly-constituted library blog.
>
> But your report's blog is not your library's blog. That simple. Makes life easier for your report, and gives you deniability in case your report pulls something stupid.

True enough—but you also can't separate the blog from the blogger or the blogger from work all that easily. That's why some organizations have blogging guidelines, guidelines that apply to anyone within the organization who blogs under their own name. I believe such guidelines make sense (as long as they're minimal and never retroactively applied); some people need a little clarification on work:life boundaries.

Sarah Houghton-Jan used Salo's post as a springboard for "Blogging about your own library's experience: career suicide or honest sharing?" (August 23, 2007 at *LibrarianinBlack*, librarianinblack.typepad.com). Her quick answer: "I'll go with both." She agrees with Salo's overall thoughts and adds (in part):

> I am by no means the first person to point this out, but it is a shame that those of us working at real life libraries cannot or will not share our work experiences out of fear of reprisals. Because of this, we do not see many of the real life problems and opportunities facing our libraries. We see the happy-ending projects in our libraries reflected in the biblioblogosphere ('cuz we're allowed to blog about smiley face things without getting screamed at). But anything that would induce a "WTF?" response from the blogger in his/her work environment cannot see the light of day online.

Houghton-Jan has run into trouble because of things she's said in her blog. She's an employee and a manager, and sees both sides of the story, but…

> I still feel that it is a shame that bloggers with so much wonderful at-work experience end up not sharing those things because of this fear. I do believe that much information is being lost as a result of this disconnect and clash of priorities. I think we're not seeing as many honest opinions and evaluations of products as we would if we were more open about what we think.

She believes we're specifically missing out on useful negative information—and she doesn't know that this will ever be solved.

Jenica P. Rogers-Urbanek followed up with "Keep it secret, keep it safe" on the same day on what was then her eponymous blog (rogersurbanek.wordpress.com, since renamed *Attempting elegance*). Ms. Rogers-Urbanek feels she walks that "blurry, shifting, man-eating line between 'it's about librarianship, and I have something to say, so I'll blog it as a contribution to the literature' and 'it's about the daily life of my library so I can't talk about it in public even if it might help someone to have a real example.'" More:

> This blog was created for three reasons.
>
> 1. I love to write, and I want to contribute.

> 2. Because our profession is not ready for full disclosure from its professionals, I needed to separate the personal and the private.
>
> 3. I was told by someone in the position to do so that librarians who blogged with full attribution would not be hired by that library.
>
> Because of #3, this is, in fact, an act of rebellion. What's the URL? My name. Is my name common? Hell no… Why am I rebelling? Because I don't like the attitude that Dorothea references when she writes "And when you get in trouble, no one will defend you. You shoulda known better, mate. It's the Internet, after all." Yep. It's the internet. It's the New World Of Online Communication. Get over it, and defend yourself against the people who can't get over it. Rewrite the profession, if you have to. Stand up for yourself, fer goddsake.
>
> So. Will I be listing this on my CV when next I apply for a job? No. But I know employers google candidates, and I want this face to come up first, see #2… And anyone who finds this and doesn't like what's here… well, then, I guess they didn't like me, very much. Good to know in advance.
>
> And I don't write about the day-to-day, or the failures, or the internal staff issues. And, like Dorothea and the LiB, I think that's a shame. Because my experiences as a young manager, as a collections librarian, as a woman looking to be a leader in academia… they might be useful to my peers. For now, though, out of fear of reprisal, we'll all just have to read between the lines.

This situation isn't unique to blogs. Sensible people in the library field have been self-censoring their posts on lists and groups ever since there have been lists and groups. Some of us have weak self-censors. Some of us get in trouble. Sometimes, that's legitimate: It is inappropriate to blog or otherwise write publicly about confidential material or to discuss coworkers by name without their express permission. Sometimes, it's more difficult, as in the cases stated or suggested in these posts. You feel something needs to be said. Are you ready to risk your job or your advancement over the need to say it? Most of us, most of the time, are not (and in this case, "us" most definitely includes me).

A few words about liblog surveys

Three data points, each of interest—the OEDb "Top 25 Librarian Bloggers (By the Numbers)"; Meredith Farkas' 2007 Survey of the Biblioblogosphere; and Farkas' later survey of "three favorite librar* blogs." Since I took part in both of Farkas' surveys and was, strangely, in the top ten in both numbered lists, some brief notes may be in order:

- The OEDb list suffers from a wildly inadequate starting list of "librarian bloggers." Too many important bloggers weren't on the astonishingly short list of candidates; some of us who were on that list aren't, technically, librarians. As for the numbers themselves, they're repetitive but probably do provide a rough measure of readership and reach.
- The survey was fascinating, with an astonishing 839 people filling out the survey—more than half of whom started blogging in the last two years. Nearly a quarter of library-related bloggers blog anonymously or pseudonymously. Nearly 80% of bloggers use either Blogger or WordPress. More than half of the bloggers have published professionally—as have nearly three-quarters of those with older blogs. Women are taking up blogging faster than men, but are still "underrepresented" relative to the field as a whole. More than a third of libloggers are over 40. That's just the tip of a fascinating iceberg.
- "Three favorite" is a maddening question. I answered based on momentary interest; there is no way I could name three long-tem favorites. The results were fascinating and, naturally, somewhat controversial. I was—*I am*—honored that *Walt at random* came in #9 on the list; I believe that blogs with distinctly personal voices tend to do better in "favorite" surveys. (I'd say each one of the top ten blogs on the survey has its own distinct persona; it would be difficult to mistake a *Caveat lector* post for one at *Tame the web*.)
- If you know why you're blogging, your place (or lack thereof) on surveys won't bother you…at least if you're blogging for what I'd call "the right reasons." Jennifer Macaulay got that right in "All about blogging," her comment on Farkas' survey (September 8, 2007, *Life as I know it*, scruffynerf.wordpress.com) Of course, Macaulay frequently says interesting things well—if she wasn't one of my three "favorites" at the point I filled out the survey (I don't remember who they were), she might very well be at some other point. "I've gotten comfortable with my blog, with its readership and with those people that I have developed relationships. It has been a wonderful and extremely successful experience for me." What more can you ask for?
- Ryan Deschamps offered a charming set of liblog "types" in "A late-comer but more on surveys," posted September 18, 2007 at *The other librarian* (otherlibrarian.wordpress.com). I'm going to suggest you **go read this one yourself**, for reasons that may be obvious when you do.

That's *way* too much commentary about blogging—but hey, it's been almost a year. Of course, I could do this as a blog post…or as sixteen of them, most still "too long for a blog."

Interesting & Peculiar Products

Color at 42 PPM!

That's the promise of Xerox' $1,600 Phaser 63600DN color laser printer—and an Editors' Choice review in the August 7, 2007 *PC Magazine* supports the claim. That's not surprising: Unlike inkjet printers, laser printers almost always operate at their claimed speed.

The unit has a duplexer, a 550-sheet standard tray and a 150-sheet multipurpose tray; you can add optional paper trays for total 2,350-sheet capacity. Text quality isn't quite as good as on most lasers, but it sure is fast.

Really Big Monitors

I'm still delighted with my 19" Sony LCD display, even if I've had it for a couple of years now. Serious aficionados would say it's too small—I need at least a 22" widescreen (which would probably be a little shorter than this display) and preferably a 24" unit. But wait! There's more! A June 2007 *PC World* piece reviews three *30-inch* LCDs, giving a Best Buy to the HP LP3065 for its stellar image quality and large number of ports. It's also the cheapest of the three—by a buck. It costs $1,699 as compared to $1,700 for the Dell UltraSharp 3007WFP and $1,800 for the Samsung SyncMaster 305T. What kind of resolution can you get on that big a screen? 2560x1600—if you have a graphics card with enough oomph and dual DVI-out.

Audyssey Sound Processing

This isn't exactly a product—it's software that comes built into a growing number of A/V receivers. Audyssey is designed to handle speaker configuration automatically, but also to do room equalization, tweaking amplifier response to account for the standing waves and other irregularities that plague most real-life acoustical spaces.

According to a writeup in the August 2007 *Home Theater*, it works remarkably well, at least the higher-end Audyssey MultiEQ Pro. You have to do some of the work (placing the supplied microphone in several different room locations and pressing buttons), but the reviewer found even the lower-end version improvements "nothing short of dramatic," improving clarity and broadening the "sweet spot" so you can get good sound in more locations within a room.

The Must-Have Device du Jour

That's how Stewart Wolpin describes the Apple iPhone in a September 2007 *The Perfect Vision* review—an over-the-top comment followed by "this first-generation model is not for everyone." So we must have it even though it's not for everyone?

It's an appropriately fawning review from a magazine that at one point seemed to stress serious reviews of video equipment but has turned into another glossy wowie-zowie magazine. Somehow it's a wonderful idea that you can't activate an iPhone when you buy it. When I saw that pricing plans *start* at $60 a month, I *knew* the iPhone wasn't for me: Our use of cell phones is such that we're now using a $15-a-quarter automatic-top-up pay-as-you go phone, and the saved $660/year will buy a lot of other things. (We're not everyone—but we're not nobody either.)

It's not an entirely positive review, even as Wolpin speaks of "endlessly entertaining YouTube" (some people are more easily endlessly-entertained than others): The simulated keyboard's a lot slower than any physical keyboard, for example. This review isn't as hard on the iPhone's mediocre quality as a, um, *phone* as some other reviewss, but still admits it's not all that great. Oh, and reception problems: Wolpin says that's AT&T's fault, not Apple. On the odd "ratings" box, it gets a pretty poor rating for audio quality, worse for web access and only slightly better for voice quality—but it gets top marks for "intangibles." After all, it *is* an Apple product. So, even though the music playback *in particular* is not very good (with the usual crappy Apple supplied earbuds—and it's designed to make it difficult to plug in other ones), the review ends: "But for most folks, this is the music phone you've been praying for." Whatever.

PC Magazine is of two minds about the iPhone, at least in the August 7, 2007 issue. Editor Jim Louderback titles his commentary "iPhone to fly…then flop," saying it will lose its cool after lots of people have it and will be relegated to "those with more money than taste." Why? Most of us *like* tactile feedback; flat screens are less satisfactory, particularly for those with "fat fingers." Those "hip, young technorati" who will flock to the iPhone will find it disappointing as an email/messaging device compared to, say, the BlackBerry or Treo—and the slow connection makes web surfing "like trying to drive the autobahn on a Vespa." Also, *it's too expensive* for the U.S. market, where we're used to heavily subsidized cell phones. Lance Ulanoff uses a complementary title: "iPhone to flop…then fly." He's *sure* of this: "Anyone who doesn't know this isn't paying attention." (Don't you love absolute certainty?) He takes care of all the issues raised by "naysayers"—single carrier, too expensive, no buttons—and tells us why they're all wrong, wrong, wrong. After all, Apple always charges more for its premium products—and "all the young, trendy, flexible iPod-loving customers Apple cares about" will just *love* an interface with no tactile feedback. He used the word "all"—I didn't add that universalism. He assures us the iPhone "will become the ultimate cell-phone status symbol" and will be "a blockbuster success. I guarantee it." So who is Lance Ulanoff—besides, presumably, being incredibly wealthy with his 100% absolute knowledge of consumer desires? Damned if I know. (OK, I do know: He's a PC journalist—he's been writing about this stuff for a while. Not as long as I have, but a while.)

Make that *three* minds: The next *PC Magazine* (August 21, 2007) features a two-page formal review of the iPhone by Sascha Segan and Tim Gideon, with the headline "Fun, fabulous, and flawed." Flaws? "The built-in speaker…can be used for music and movies, but sounds lousy. Volume controls sit conveniently on the left-hand side, but the headphone jack is recessed, which makes it all but impossible to use a standard stereo headset without an adapter." OK, those are nits. These, not so much:

> Call quality was the worst we've heard on a high-end device in years. Earpiece volume is a bit understated, and the speakerphone is downright quiet. Voices through the earpiece are a bit muffled, but comprehensible. Transmission, on the other hand, is vile. We got static in our in-ear feedback, and calls made with the iPhone sounded hideously compressed on the other end. We had two dropped calls and significant audio wobble. Inexplicably, at one point we got the distinctive dit-dit-dit of GSM RFI interference over *our own call*.

Didn't Stewart Wolpin point the finger at AT&T for call quality—without offering any evidence? These reviewers tried another AT&T cell phone at the same time, presumably over the same towers and circuits.

> We're not going to put these audio issues on AT&T, either, since our BlackBerry Curve made much clearer calls at the same time, in the same place. Reception also leaves something to be desired. Basically, as a handset, the iPhone is complicated to dial, difficult to send text messages with, and missing all sorts of features that are usually taken for granted in high-end multimedia phones nowadays, including picture messaging, IM, and voice dialing.

Basically, the iPhone may be a great iPod, but it appears to be a lousy cell phone. If there are those who still believe that a cell phone should first and foremost be competent as a phone, that is…

Other Phones

If you're one of the few holdouts who doesn't see the iPhone as mandatory, other interesting choices are emerging. *PC Magazine* gives an Editors' Choice and four-dot rating to the $295 Helio Ocean (Pantech PN-810), an interesting package that can slide vertically to expose a phone keyboard or horizontally to reveal a full QWERTY keyboard. Helio runs over Sprint, so you get fairly fast access via Sprint's EV-DO network. The most powerful feature appears to be the messaging client (which can integrate text and email from AOL, Gmail, Windows Live and Yahoo!, along with IM from AIM, Yahoo! and MSN). The review calls this the "queen bee" of messaging-centric devices.

Feisty Fawn?

Silly name, superior product, according to an August 2007 *PC World* review, which gives this item a very high 92 points. Oh, and it's free. The less whimsical name is Ubuntu Linux 7.04, and it appears to be an excellent introduction to Linux, even installing easily as a dual-boot product on a Windows box (and copying your bookmarks, documents, etc. in the process). By default, the downloadable CD-ROM install will come up with Gnome as a user interface; if you prefer KDE (closer to Windows), you might prefer Kubuntu as an install. You also get OpenOffice 2.2, Firefox, GIMP and lots of other software. Since the CD-ROM itself boots up as a self-contained environment instead of the setup program, you can try it out first—see whether your peripherals are covered, for example.

I don't know that I'm ready to give Linux a try, but distributions like this make it more plausible.

Editors' Choices and Other Winners

PC World's "luxury laptop" roundup in September 2007 gives two Best Buy awards. As a desktop replacement, they choose the $3,000 HP Pavilion HDX, with a 2.4GHz Intel Core 2 Duo CPU, 20.1" wide screen, HD DVD drive (but only burns regular DVDs), two 100GB hard disks and a 15.1lb. weight. It's huge, heavy, and fast—and, of course, wildly expensive, performing the rare feat of out-pricing Apple's high-end MacBook Pro, if by a mere $51. (It's a gamer's machine, and for them no price is too high.) As an all-purpose laptop, the $2,004 Lenovo ThinkPad R61 gets the nod: 2.2GHz Core 2 Duo, 14.1" screen, 5.8 lb., and better than three hour battery life.

PC Magazine looked at half a dozen notebooks using Intel's new Mobile Centrino platform in a July 17, 2007 review. A single Editors' Choice emerged: the $2,510 Lenovo ThinkPad T61 Widescreen: 2.4GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T7700.

The same issue reviews half a dozen 22" widescreen LCD displays—"the big picture" when you're still dealing with an ordinary desk. I was quite surprised by the Editors' Choice—the $500 Westinghouse LCM-22w2, with loads of ports and strong image quality. Second place and an identical four-dot rating: The $400 Sansumg SyncMaster 225BW.

The August 21, 2007 *PC Magazine* looks at desktops and notebooks, claiming to offer "the best new PC for you." Their choices? For bargain hunters, the $1,099 Dell Inspiron 1420 (well configured for the price, but it's hard to call an $1,100 notebook a bargain-hunter's dream). For road warriors, the $2,700 Lenovo ThinkPad X60. For musicians, Apple's MacBook Pro ($2,000) or Mac Pro ($8,577!) For business professionals, the $1,260 Lenovo ThinkCentre m55e mini-desktop and Lenovo ThinkPad T61 Widescreen ($2,510). Family guys? HP's $1,800 Touchsmart IQ770. Home theater: The $5,500 Niveus Media Center Rainier Edition. College students: The $709 Dell Inspiron 531 ($899 with a 19" monitor) and $999 Velocity Micro Vector GX Campus Edition, both desktops. For artist/designers, the $2,750 Apple iMac 24", and for cramped-space dwellers, the $1,500 Apple iMac 20".

A "new breed" roundup in the September 18, 2007 *PC Magazine* covers midrange notebooks, typically costing $1,000 to $2,000: heavier than ultraportables but with larger screens. Of six units tested, two earn Editors' Choices: The 1,999 Apple MacBook Pro 15-inch (LED) and $1,099 Dell Inspiron 1420. The MacBook is generally better equipped and better designed, but it's also nearly twice as expensive; the Inspiron is well equipped for the price, and still comes in at just under six pounds.

PC Magazine awards an Editors' Choice to the $2,200 Dell XPS M1330 ultraportable in its September 18, 2007 issue. Ultraportables always cost more, in this case a *lot* more. The reviw uses the Lenovo ThinkPad X60 as a comparison point and is faster in every respect (but has slightly worse battery life). It comes with a 160GB hard disk and an integrated DVD burner (unusual for ultraportables) and as a 2.0GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T7300 CPU, 2GB RAM, and discrete nVidia graphics; the 13.3" screen is LED backlit. It just *barely* qualifies as an ultraportable (*PC* sets a four-pound cutoff), and that only with the smaller of two battery options. Still, it's a sleek, loaded system.

An August 7, 2007 *PC Magazine* "superguide" for point-and-shoot cameras yields three Editors' Choices: the $300 Canon PowerShot SD1000 (7.1 megapixels, 3x optical zoom), $300 Canon PowerShot A630 (8MP, 4x optical zoom, smaller) and $350 Panasonic Lumix DMC-TZ3 (7.2MP, 10x optical zoom). A related superguide covers photo-editing software and offers two Editors' Choices: The usual (Adobe PhotoShop Elements, $100) and a freebie, Google Picasa.

PC World evaluates "bargain cameras" in an August 2007 group review; as usual, only the top five are listed. Of those, the $130 Canon PowerShot A460 gets Best Buy honors; it's a 5MP camera with 4x zoom and good image quality.

Security software favorites keep changing. *PC Magazine*'s August 21, 2007 issue doesn't have a roundup but does include a new contender: Spy Sweeper 5.5, now with Sophos antivirus support. It earns an Editors' Choice—not surprising, since Spy Sweeper has always been well-regarded. This isn't a full suite (no firewall) and it doesn't block spyware installation as well as it removes existing spyware.

The October 2007 *PC World* roundup of color laser printers gives first place to a remarkably inexpensive unit, Dell's $299 Color Laser Printer 1320c—but that's a tricky rating, as its per-page costs are apparently quite high. It's also relatively slow for a contemporary laser (12.4 ppm text, 4.2 graphics) but does offer "surprisingly smooth photo quality for a low-end laser." Clearly the price weighs heavily in this point system.

PC World says that Microsoft Windows Defender won't do a good job protecting you from spyware—and that Spybot Search & Destroy is no longer a good tool. Best Buy in a test of several spyware tools (not suites): PC Tools Spyware Doctor 5.0, $30 per year.

Who does the best mapping-and-direction work? *PC World*'s October 2007 article yields a surprise winner, one that I've been using for a while: Microsoft Live Search, scoring a "Superior" 95 points. Ask City also scores Superior at 93. MapQuest is the lowest of the five listed; things do change.

My Back Pages

$300 Socks?

You have to wonder sometimes. I gave up on *Business 2.0* before Time Inc. gave up on it, because it seemed to favor making money at any cost—no matter how sleazy or damaging the "business" scheme. Just to keep a hand in, I picked up *Fast Company* again; I'd dropped it years back because it seemed too cultish, but that seems to have gone by the wayside.

Here's the September 2007 issue and Dan and Chip Heath's "Made to stick" column: "The inevitability of $300 socks." Subtitle: "How ideas pave the way for products." It's not about how good ideas can become worthwhile products—it's about how turning a product into an "idea" can "transform us from consumers to connoisseurs" and justify $300 jeans or, in the future, $300 socks.

It's apparently all about "luxury" and "self-expression." You know, "self-expression" like paying more so you can advertise some company on your handbag or outerwear. It's part of this movement that sees "folks who can barely make rent pay $15 a pound for Costa Rican organic coffee." Or, a bit later: "You are, it seems, what you blow a lot of money on." And you must be *recognized* as a "connoisseur"—the specialness of your overpriced products has to be visible to other "connoisseurs." One sock designer's already turning out $35 socks; can $300 pairs be far behind?

Oh, sure, the Heaths offer a tiny caveat: "Yes, we all know that no one in their right mind would ever pay $300 for socks." Followed by this: "But having a right mind is so yesterday." Realistically, the whole column *celebrates* paying way too much for a product because it's an "idea." Not, to be sure, actually thinking and having your own ideas—where's the consumerism in that? And isn't it all about the buying and immediate gratification—even when you can't afford the house you own and you have no retirement savings? Don't you *deserve* $300 socks?

Ain't Design Wonderful?

The October 2007 *Fast Company* focused on "Masters of Design." I won't comment on the issue in general. Yes, attention to design makes sense. On the other hand, as a reader I'm frequently offended by websites and print resources that have clearly been "designed"—since many designers appear to detest text and do their best to minimize its use and usefulness.

This item is about one of the "widgets we love," part of a strange multipage set of various items chosen by various designers. To wit, LePen felt-tip markers. Here's what Tom Scott (a fashion designer) has to say: "I hate ballpoint pens; they're too neat and precise. Besides the ritzy name, LePen markers look classic and simple, and write better as you wear the tips down."

Isn't that special? It's a *bad thing* for a writing instrument to be neat and precise—unless, of course, you're using it to, oh, I dunno, *write stuff* you want to be able to read later. There it is: Annoying old text again. If your primary use of a writing instrument is doodling, maybe imprecision and sloppiness (that is, *not* being neat and precise) are virtues.

I own a LePen—only because I took off for a conference too early in the morning, failed to put my pen in my pocket (UniBall Grip 0.2mm Micro at the time), and had to buy a writing instrument at the airport. The LePen is a straight stick, about as "classic" as a Bic stick: too narrow to be held comfortably in larger hands. As a writing instrument, it suffers because the ink smears easily. I haven't worn it down enough yet to make it write "better" (that is, less precisely), mostly because I find it less than mediocre as, you know, a *writing* instrument.

"Cheap" and "Reasonable"

Some of the writers for *Stereophile*—one of the cost-no-object audiophile magazines—seem to know the game they're playing. In the April 2007 issue, Sam Tellig asserts that the sweet spot for CD players is $2,000 to $2,500—and suggests that one of the lead reviewers wouldn't waste his time on players at such a "reasonable price" (that reviewer exclaims over a $100,000 turntable—oops, now it's up to $125,000—and is also enthusiastic about a $28,000 CD player). Tellig even refers to a $2,000 CD player as "good stuff cheap" and says "good riddance" to those of us who wouldn't pay more than $200 for a CD player—and mostly are playing CDs on DVD players these days anyway. (He makes a similar point in May 2007, noting that a $399 power amp from B&K Components "didn't cost nearly enough to be taken seriously" when it was introduced in 1981—although, now that I think about it, that's equivalent to $941 in 2006! He goes on to say that a new $2,995 stereo amplifier *still* doesn't cost enough to be worthy fare for some of the magazine's reviewers. I suspect he's right.)

Later in that issue and maybe not deserving a separate item, we get a surprisingly honest review of a "monoblock power amplifier" that runs $16,500 a pair. The first four paragraphs are exultations over how it *looks*—"Carved out of a 75-lb billet of aluminum…into a hunka hunka shiny, anodized audio *presence*." On the cover they call this relatively small amplifier "elegant," but the reviewer's language smacks more of a strip club patron.

Ah, but here's an item in the June 2007 issue that's *not* too cheap for the magazine's reviewers to take seriously. It's a stereo preamp—a *solid-state* preamp, not one of the tubed devices that appeal to elements of the high end. It's called the darTZeel NHB-18NS (strange orthography isn't limited to software any more). Measured performance isn't great. Even the enthusiastic reviewer suspects that the preamp is coloring the sound—but he's "not sure it matters" because it makes pretty music, whether accurate or not. It may not work great "if your cables suffer from clogged sonic arteries" (if that phrase sounds like crapola to you, you're not in this reviewer's target audience). But, hey, it's only **$23,000**. For a solid-state stereo preamp.

The August 2007 *Stereophile* includes reports on the Home Entertainment 2007 show, including a comment that sound in one particular room was "shockingly good, given the seemingly modest gear on offer." What does this writer consider so "seemingly modest" that good sound is shocking? A $10,500 pair of speakers, a $4,000 stereo amp (modestly powered at 30 watts per channel), a **$14,000** CD (and SACD) player, some fancy cables that look to cost about $3,000 for one component interconnect and a pair of speaker cables—and $1,200 power line conditioners. There you have it: a stereo system costing more than $32,000 (no turntable, no tuner, no surround) is "modest."

Columnettes?

The one-page column is a staple of magazines of all sorts. Typically 600 to 800 words, it's long enough for an extended thought and short enough that most people can read it in a couple of minutes. Typical newspaper columns are about the same length: A sixth of a newspaper page is roughly equivalent to a full magazine page.

Maybe this era, where short attention spans seem to be desirable, no longer has room for such lengthy expositions. So I shouldn't have been surprised to open the July/August 2007 *Sound & Vision* and find what I can only think of as "columnettes"—*half-page* magazine columns, with device photos in some cases, leaving around 300 words for the column itself. These aren't columns so much as sound bites.

Sigh. The October 7 *PC World* now has two-thirds-of-a-page columns. And in sans text where most articles are serif. So not only are the columns shorter, they're designed to be less readable. Or, since a designer was probably involved, they're "more modern."

Who Cares About the Sound?

Speaking of Ken Pohlmann, his September 2007 *Sound & Vision* columnette is a wondrous thing to read in a magazine supposedly dedicated to quality sound. He decides to see whether the new non-DRM 256K $1.29 tracks from iTunes are better than the DRM-heavy $0.99 128K tracks.

He buys five *pop* tracks, generally the least likely to show differences. He listens to them "carefully on Bose headphones"—he doesn't say what kind of player he was using, and few audiophiles would consider Bose to be a bastion of sonic authority, but never mind. Even so, with a test protocol seemingly designed to minimize audible differences, he finds *every single track* to sound better in the 256K version. That's impressive.

Also impressive, or maybe "depressing" is a better term, is his conclusion:

> So, yes, iTunes Plus does sound better. Very slightly. And under everyday conditions (with crappy earbuds), most people won't hear any difference. So, except for your absolute favorite tunes, the sonic improvement of a Plus download probably isn't worth the premium.

You're too dumb or cheap to shell out for better earbuds anyway, so why bother paying for decent sound? I would say you should expect better within an enthusiast's magazine, but maybe that's just old school.

Reasonable Redux?

The October 2007 *PC World* reviews HP's Photosmart C5280 all-in-one—a favorable review focusing on the improved design of the printer. That's fine except for the penultimate paragraph: "The unit's costs per printed page…are reasonable: 8 cents per page of black text, and 24.1 cents per page for all three colors plus black."

Eight cents per page for ordinary text? Reasonable? Not if this is your primary printer. My Canon tests out at 2.7 cents a page. I'd love to see it even lower, but that's *one-third* of the materials cost of the HP.

OK, so I paid $180 instead of $150. I think I'm getting better speeds. I *know* that over the first year of printing (which I'm estimating at 5,000 text pages), I'll save $295 in ink costs compared to the HP. Frankly, at this point I can't imagine using "reasonable" to describe print costs any higher than four cents a page.

Masthead

Cites & Insights: Crawford at Large, Volume 7, Number 12, Whole Issue 96, ISSN 1534-0937, a journal of libraries, policy, technology and media, is written and produced by Walt Crawford, Director and Managing Editor of the PALINET Learning Network.

Cites & Insights is sponsored by YBP Library Services, http://www.ybp.com.

Opinions herein may not represent those of PALINET or YBP Library Services.

Comments should be sent to waltcrawford@gmail.com. *Cites & Insights: Crawford at Large* is copyright © 2007 by Walt Crawford: Some rights reserved.

All original material in this work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/1.0 or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.

URL: citesandinsights.info/civ7i12.pdf