Cites & Insights

Crawford at Large

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Volume 8, Number 6: June 2008 ISSN 1534-0937 Walt Crawford

Bibs & Blather

Quick Updates: Limits and Slouching

I was about to apologize for this being an odd issue (I'd originally planned to include TRENDS & QUICK TAKES, MY BACK PAGES, INTERESTING & PECULIAR PRODUCTS—or at least two of those three)—but that assumes facts no longer in evidence. That is, that there's something like a "normal issue" of *Cites & Insights*. I think the most recent "normal issue" is November 2007.

Since I'm as proud of the last six issues as of most earlier ones, I'm beginning to think "normal issue" has as much meaning as say, "average blog." Meanwhile, this one includes three perspectives on very different topics and the second RETROSPECTIVE—and I think the Retrospectives are worth reading (I found them worth assembling). If nothing else, you can satisfy yourself that I'm not among the hallowed circle of Those Who Are Never Wrong. Not even close! That's just as well. I find that people who are never wrong drive me up the wall, and I'd like to stay reasonably comfortable in my own skin.

Meanwhile, before we get to the big fat essays, I wanted to point to one earlier essay that might deserve revisiting in the near future—and add a little content to an essay from the May issue.

A Time of Limits?

The trailing PERSPECTIVE in *Cites & Insights* 8:1 (January 2008). I recommend it. Maybe I should expand on it, bringing in more issues and relating it to library issues. Some day…maybe.

Slouching a Little Further

Last issue's MAKING IT WORK PERSPECTIVE: CHANGES IN LIBLOGS: SLOUCHING TOWARD A STUDY offered up some numbers developed while I was doing preliminary work that might—or might not—lead to a truly broad view of liblogs. The less said about the length of the title, the better…

The preliminary work is complete—and I did do a little more after writing that essay. I still haven't made any decisions about "the real project," and I won't until at least June 8. In the meantime:

- I did March-May 2007 tracking for the rest of the blogs, those that hadn't been studied in 2005 or 2006. The baseline is complete.

Inside This Issue

- I decided to broaden the universe a little more—by looking at blogrolls within liblogs already in the sample. To avoid complete craziness, I narrowed "looking at blogrolls" somewhat. I only looked at blogrolls on a blog's front page (not blogrolls from links), "plausible" blogrolls—those with a few or a few dozen blogs, not those with seemingly hundreds, and blogrolls or sections of blogrolls where there seemed to be some evidence of a library focus.
- Given those restrictions, I wound up going through slightly more than a hundred blogrolls in the first half of May 2008, with these results:
  - I added 47 more blogs to the list, which now totals 585 blogs.
  - I looked at more than 80 others, of which at least 21 were "essentially invisible,", at least 42 were defunct or moribund (there were no posts in 2008 or at least no posts in March or April, meaning they wouldn't qualify), at least four were official library blogs (and that wasn't obvious from the name—there were dozens I didn't need to check), at least 15 weren't library-related (and that wasn't obvious from the name),

and at least four were too new (founded in 2008). I eliminated two more, one because of excessive objectionable language, another because it had an automatic soundtrack that started as soon as I hit the blog.

- While I could carry this further, I believe diminishing returns have set in. I'm certainly grateful that a little quick sorting and formatting made it possible to print all 538 blog names (before additions) on a single sheet of paper (two sides, three columns, very small type)—after all, I probably glanced at several *thousand* blognames during that process.

Here's the baseline for any new project:

- The date distribution for liblogs is now 11 before 2002, 24 in 2002, 74 in 2003, 85 in 2004, 159 in 2005, 137 in 2006, and 95 in 2007—the same curve as before, moved slightly to the right. Of those begun in 2007, 48 began in May or later, so I didn't calculate baseline statistics (a blog had to start *at least* by April 2007 to include March-May posts). That means the maximum for any 2007 analysis is 537: 585 minus 48.
- Further 2007 and year-to-year analysis will be based on at most 491 blogs for **post count** (46 others were either defunct, had no posts during the period or had inaccessible archives); 412 blogs for **length** of posts (79 had partly-hidden posts in archives or some other problem, e.g., inability to copy more than one post at a time); 443 blogs for **number of comments** (48 didn't allow comments or comment counts appeared to be hidden—of those, I believe 28 didn't allow comments); and 429 blogs for **number of illustrations** (there were a few cases where I couldn't calculate length but I could *see* complete posts and count figures).

Here's my three-way choice for proceeding:

- **Least work**: With no more investigation I could produce a *C&I* article or a series of posts detailing the 2007 metrics and listing outstanding blogs.
- **Some work**: I could do the metrics for 2008 and produce a much longer article (or series of articles) discussing changes from 2007 and metrics for both years—but, again, without any discussion of *individual* blogs.
- **Lots of work**: Full-fledged metrics in considerably more detail, commentary (objective and maybe subjective) on each blog, and an index—produced as a book.

I'll do one of the three. Which? Your advice is still welcome—and now, thanks to a change at *Walt at random*, I can give you a meaningful URL for the post where you can add your comments (or you can email them to me at waltcrawford@gmail.com, preferably by June 8): walt.lishost.org/2008/03/a-really-big-look-at-liblogs-good-idea-or-waste-of-time/

Your frank opinions welcome, but keep the language reasonably polite.

Perspective
On Wikis and Transparency

Transparency is a Very Good Thing.

Except, of course, when it isn't.

As with most good things, there are times when transparency isn't appropriate—and other times when we may not be aware just how transparent we are.

When isn't transparency appropriate?

Obvious cases: Personnel and awards. Those are the only areas where ALA allows closed meetings: When personnel issues are being discussed and when awards are being judged.

Less obvious cases: When it's *premature* to reveal everything about a situation.

Sometimes, that's a competitive issue. I wouldn't expect Honda or GM to have webcams in their design studios, showing us what they're thinking about for future models. I don't believe Google opens the doors of all its offices at all times to everyone who'd like to hear what researchers are working on for changes in their ranking algorithms or for new services.

At other times, it's an issue of maturity. Too much transparency on a new service may get in the way of its becoming successful.

While this isn't a lengthy discourse on transparency in general, I'll offer an example or two:

- I would *love* to know how many Kindles were sold in that vaunted 5.5 hours between it going on sale and the first production run selling out—but for Amazon to reveal sales figures *at that point* could have damaged Amazon's efforts to make Kindle succeed. (Five months later, I believe it's legitimate to wonder why there are no sales figures.)
- If a reliable survey of library chat reference service had been done a month after such services were introduced, with 100% response rate, the numbers might have convinced other libraries that chat reference was a non-starter. That would (I believe) have been a mistake. It was too soon to dig into the numbers. A *year* after introduction, there should be useful numbers.

I'm not arguing against transparency in general. The first sentence in this essay is not there for ironic value.

As a rule, I believe in transparency—but not always. (Nor do I believe anyone's proposing universal transparency under all circumstances.)

Unexpected transparency

Life gets interesting when we're more transparent than we expected. In face-to-face situations, that's not unusual: Body language frequently betrays what we feel, independent of what's coming out of our mouths.

I suspect we usually think we have some measure of control in other situations—indeed, things may be less transparent than we'd like. For example, I have no real idea how many people read *Walt at random*—and I'll suggest that, given aggregation, most bloggers who provide full-text feeds don't have much idea how often their posts are being read. More to the point, *you* have very little idea how many people read *Walt at random* and even less idea how many people read *Cites & Insights*—unless I make a point of telling you and you believe what I say. For blogs, you can get a vague sense of some other blog's overall readership within the two most popular aggregators, Bloglines and Google Reader: Both services will report numbers, at least to one feed in each case and at least if you're willing to subscribe to the blog temporarily. But that's a vague sense at best. It overcounts thanks to abandoned and unread subscriptions and undercounts thanks to other aggregators and direct readership. For other websites, all measures are wildly approximate and indirect, including Google PageRank, pop.urio.us and Alexa.

On the other hand, those indirect measures and other web resources may make some situations a lot more transparent than we'd really like. Sure, Worldcat.org doesn't include all libraries—but when a supposedly best-selling book only shows up at six libraries on Worldcat.org a year after publication, you'd have to have severe nasal congestion not to smell something funny about the "best selling" claim. That's just one example; there are many others.

The situation considered in the rest of this essay is different. One class of software that's useful for many libraries—in particular the most commonly-used example in that class—defaults to remarkable transparency. You can control that transparency, but you may not want to. I will argue that you *shouldn't* reduce the transparency—but that you should be aware of the transparency.

MediaWiki Transparency

Wikis can have many uses within libraries—not just the huge wikis such as *Wikipedia* but also library-hosted wikis. Most library wikis use the same wiki software as *Wikipedia* and *Citizendium:* MediaWiki, created to support *Wikipedia* and issued as open source software, free for the taking.

MediaWiki is a good choice. It obviously scales well. Your library wiki probably won't have two million articles or be edited by tens of thousands of people. It has lots of extensions for those who need more than the standard features—and those standard features are fairly extended. The markup language is no worse than most other wikitext systems and deviates from the norm primarily in one respect, one where I regard MediaWiki's choice as superior. Namely, you don't link to or create new pages by using CamelCase (words and phrases without internal spaces but with internal capitals); instead, you use explicit markup for links.

One of MediaWiki's strengths is also, potentially, a weakness: It is *extremely* transparent, at least in a standard install. Anyone with ordinary read access to a typical MediaWiki can find out a *lot* about how that wiki is being used—perhaps more than you'd like them to know.

Obvious cases

One mark of a standard install is the left-hand boxes: typically three or more boxed areas to the left of article text, one marked "navigation," one marked "search," one marked "toolbox." Sometimes there are more boxes or a slightly different design.

"Navigation" includes one clear piece of high transparency (sometimes moved to "interaction"): **Recent changes**. By default, it brings up the most recent 50 changes over the most recent week—and you can adjust those to track up to 30 days and up to 500 changes. (For wikis with multiple namespaces, you can usually choose which namespace you want. You can typically also hide certain categories of changes—and, crucially for a wiki's manager/editor, you can hide *your own* changes. Part of my job as Managing Editor of PALINET Leadership Network is checking **Recent changes** every weekday—hiding my own changes and seeing what else has happened.) Glancing at "Recent changes" for a wiki can hint at several things:

- If a week's worth of changes is empty or has only one or two items, and that doesn't change much when you go to 30 days, that means the wiki isn't being actively edited. That may not be a bad thing, depending on the nature and intent of the wiki, but it's an *interesting* thing that you wouldn't always know about most writable websites.
- If 50 changes only go back for an hour or two, you know you're at a lively site—unless you

see that all those changes are from the same user or they all seem to involve deleting material or undoing other changes. Checking *Wikipedia* at 3:15 p.m. (PDT) on a Friday afternoon, the first 50 changes go back all of two *minutes*—as do the first 200 changes. I don't think you'll find anything like that anywhere else. Even at *Wiktionary*, 50 changes go back less than half an hour. At many active sites, 50 changes will take you back at least a day or two.

- Who's making the changes? If it's all one or two names, that tells you something about the wiki *as a collaborative writing project*, although nothing about its worth. If it's 20 names for 50 changes, there's a lot of collaboration.
- You might glance at the *nature* of the changes. If you see lots of cases with an IP address instead of a user and a parenthetical number in the thousands (e.g., "(+9,375)"), and a little more recently you see a named user and a negative number exactly matching the other, you're seeing spam and spamfighting—an anonymous idiot (or bot) adding huge numbers of links, some alert editor or user reversing the change. If you wonder why more and more wikis require some level of authentication for editing, wonder no more: Any reasonably popular wiki runs into spam problems, and many wiki owners can't afford to keep monitoring and reversing the problems.

Less obvious cases: Special pages

OK, so **Recent changes** tells the observer something about a wiki—but only about its editorial activity, which isn't always important, depending on the nature of the wiki.

More extensive transparency lurks behind this innocent link, usually in the toolbox: **Special pages**.

How much can you find out about a wiki? More than you might expect. Here are three examples. I'm not going to name them. In one case, the wiki's too new (and promising) for such scrutiny and in all cases it's not relevant to this discussion. The page within the **Special pages** list appears in bold—noting that there are a *lot* more pages in most **Special pages** lists.

Wiki A

Statistics: The *total* of page views for the wiki is just over 16,000—an average of 13 page views per edit. The most viewed page (other than home and administrative pages) was viewed nearly 500 times, which isn't bad for a very young wiki.

Orphaned pages: More than 50 pages don't have any links from any other pages, which suggests that interlinks aren't a primary means of navigation or that quite a few pages haven't become part of the whole. The empty **Categories** page shows another typical means of navigation that this wiki doesn't use—which only leaves searching and the table of contents on the main page. (**Dead-end pages** takes a different view: Pages that don't link anywhere else. There are even more dead-end pages, around 100, but that makes sense given the nature of this wiki.)

New pages: Another indication of activity—and in this case it's a strong indication that the wiki's being developed actively, as 50 new pages go back less than a month. Meanwhile, **Oldest pages** usually offers a good indication of the age of the wiki—in this case, four months.

While the **Statistics** page includes pageview counts for the ten most popular pages, **Popular pages** offers a sense of how diffuse usage is—that is, whether there are a *lot* of pages with reasonably high pageviews. For a very young, fairly specialized wiki, a cutoff of 50 views might make sense—and **Popular pages** shows that three dozen pages have at least 50 views. There isn't an "Unpopular pages" but you can pull up bigger sets or additional sets—in this case getting to two pages with two views, and one that's never been viewed at all. Comparing **Popular pages** with the page count on **Statistics** shows one oddity of MediaWiki counts: Some page categories aren't included in **Popular pages**. Thus, in this case, the least popular page is #115—leaving forty mystery pages.

There's a lot more. **Articles with the most revisions** provides insight into where the most collaboration is happening—although, without double-checking history and talk/discussion pages, it's hard to be sure just what that means. There's also **Articles with the fewest revisions**, in this case showing a fair number of "stable" or relatively non-collaborative pages—more than 20 pages with two revisions each.

Two oddities that the curious may find interesting: **Long pages** and **Short pages**. This wiki has a handful of fairly long pages (from 7,000 to 8,500 words, assuming six characters per word)—but even more pages that have been identified but have no content (20 pages with 0 bytes each).

Finally for this bit of snooping, and ignoring more than 50 other special pages, there's **All pages**—which lacks a counter but shows you alphabetic lists for each namespace. What's a namespace? A specific *kind* of page, typically indicated by a prefix in the pagename. For most articles in most wikis, (Main) is the namespace (and there is no prefix). But there's also a Talk namespace (the talk or discussion pages that appear with each article—but no Talk page will be listed

unless there has been text on the page), Help and Help Talk namespaces, User and User Talk—and frequently more. (For example, the PALINET Leadership Network has an Essay namespace for third-party content that's more protected than other pages and can only be viewed by registered users—and, to be sure, there's an Essay Talk namespace to match.)

What can we learn from **All pages** in this case? Eight users have text on their pages, so we can read a little about them. Five regular pages have Talk pages, frequently worth investigating in an unfamiliar wiki.

You get a fair indication of the level and kind of activity in this blog by looking at a handful of pages—and, for a typical MediaWiki install, *anyone* can look at those pages. Suspect that a wiki has gone dormant, not only in changes but in readership? Check **Statistics** one day and print it out or jot down some numbers—then check it again a week or a month later. Do be aware that your observations change reality: Every page you look at is a pageview. In this case, a recheck a week after the first draft of this article shows quite the opposite: Overall pageviews more than doubled and all other indications show a rapidly-growing wiki with significant use.

Wiki B

Here's another, very different example, one that's been around for a few years and serves a relatively small, specialized audience (but is open to anyone). You already know most of the pages I'm looking at. What can we find out about this wiki?

It's being edited, but not heavily: 50 entries go back a week and involve only three users. Overall usage is impressive for a specialized wiki, with more than 1.2 million pageviews. As it happens, this is a wiki I'd looked at two months previously—and that makes the pageviews even *more* impressive, as it comes out to 175,000 pageviews in two months. At more than 48 pageviews per edit, this is a wiki used for reading more than writing. The claim is that just over 1,100 pages out of 3,500 are "legitimate content," and that may be right in this case. Two content pages show more than 20,000 views and the 10th most viewed page is still well above 8,000—which is very good given the limited audience.

There are a *lot* of orphaned pages—more than 1,000—including a few that are spam and many that are supposedly visible only to special users. (That's not true: They show up from **Orphaned pages**, which means this wiki may be more transparent than its managers intend. For that matter, they also show up when reached from the "Restricted" category page.)

This wiki *does* use categories, and there are a lot fewer **Uncategorized pages** than orphaned pages, so categories are a strong navigation tool (but not part of the leftside toolboxes). There are more than 1,000 dead-end pages, many of which also appear to be orphaned pages: Pages stored for convenience but not intended to be part of the main wiki navigation.

The wiki's been around for a while and is relatively stable in terms of topics: only two new pages were added in the last month. **Oldest pages** suggests that the wiki started in June 2004 (with a trial entry somewhat earlier).

As for breadth of use, it's impressive. Nearly sixty pages have been viewed more than 2,000 times; another 90 have more than 1,000 pageviews; and more than 360 pages have at least 500 views—this in a wiki with a narrow focus and a narrow audience. (More than 1,100 pages have more than 100 views!)

What else? A handful of pages have been frequently revised (21 with more than 100 revisions) while a lot of pages haven't involved much collaboration (more than 100 pages with two revisions and another 100+ with three). Two oddities: There are a few dozen "double redirects," where a page has been renamed more than once, and more than 20 "broken redirects"—redirects that link to nonexistent pages.

What about extremes of length? Five pages have more than 100,000 characters (more than 16,000 words) and nearly two dozen exceed 42,000 characters (7,000 words)—the point at which MediaWiki sometimes complains about editability. Fewer than 10 pages have no content at all, but some fifty are short enough to suggest that they're test pages. There's nothing noteworthy in terms of namespaces.

All in all? The picture of an established specialized wiki that continues to be actively used across a broad range of content. The owners may not be aware that the "restricted" pages aren't really restricted, but that's about the only negative comment I can offer.

Wiki C

This one theoretically serves many institutions but with a relatively narrow focus—and it's another one I'd looked at two months ago, allowing me to see how active it is currently. The wiki's three years old and has just over three-quarters of a million pageviews—including just over 100,000 in the last two months, which is healthy activity. About 10% of all pages appear to be content pages—something over 100.

Two dozen pages don't have links from other pages and six dozen are dead-end. While categories are definitely used, more than 150 pages lack catego-

ries—but checking a sampling of those showed strong linkage in most cases.

The wiki isn't getting many new pages: Three in the last five months. Neither is it heavily collaborative at the moment: All edits over the last week were either spam or reversion of spam. Looking at old pages marks the start of this wiki in March 2005—with a *lot* of pages added in the first few months.

Breadth of use? Quite good. A fair number in excess of 10,000 views; a *lot* with more than 2,000 (more than 60, with another 50-odd exceeding 1,000); and nearly all of the pages that show up in this list (which typically excludes most special categories and namespaces) have more than 500 views—just over 160 out of a total 198. Basically, whatever's there is being viewed frequently.

Some typical special pages don't show up on this install; I can't tell you which pages are most or least frequently revised or whether there are any double or broken redirects. On the other hand, **Long pages** and **Short pages** are here but undramatic. No page exceeds 20,000 characters (roughly 3,500 words) and only a dozen are much more than 1,000 words; there's one empty page but only a couple more so short to be accidental or quick definitions.

All pages shows rather a lot of Talk pages relative to the total number of articles—which usually means one of two things: The wiki has a lot of real conversation or there's a spam problem. Clicking through to a sampling suggests that both are true—and the number of empty but created Talk pages says there's an ongoing effort to battle spam.

Summing Up

If you or your institution has a wiki, particularly a MediaWiki wiki, I am **not** suggesting that you panic or find ways to lock things down. I believe most of this transparency is all to the good in most situations—as long as you're aware of it.

I wouldn't store sensitive information on supposedly restricted pages unless you're *sure* they're restricted. I wouldn't make claims about the activity on your wiki unless internal evidence backs up those claims. Evidence from log analysis packages may be misleading (for reasons too peculiar to mention). If the log analysis package says you've had 85,000 pageviews and the **Statistics** page shows 70,000—well, I know which one I'd believe.

Sure, you can make your wiki more opaque. You can use a different wiki package. Of those I've observed, most seem to offer a lot less information to outsiders than MediaWiki does. Or you can modify MediaWiki to be less transparent: It's open source software, after all.

If you look at wikindex (www.wikindex.com), "the index for wiki sites," the MediaWiki section lists more than 3,000 MediaWiki wikis ranked by some combination of usage, size, users and updates. (It also shows some sets of wikis using other software, but none of them have ranks at this writing.) Consider the highest-ranked wikis that *aren't* various Wikipedias (that is, English, German, French, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Swedish: Seven of the eight highest-ranked wikis). *Wikipedia* shows most special pages, although pageviews don't appear, at least on English *Wikipedia*. What about some other "popular" wikis (many of which appear to come from Wikia, Jimmy Wales' for-profit operation)?

- Wikimedia Commons and Wiktionary use what appears to be the same modified set of special pages as Wikipedia.
- Wookieepedia, the Star Wars wiki (I kid you not: it ranks 10th) includes almost all of the special pages—but omits **Popular pages** and omits pageviews in **Statistics**.
- wikiHow (#11), on the other hand, is transparent—the appearance is heavily modified (and the statistics page, for one, far more attractive than most), but as of early May 2008, it tells me there have been more than 281 million pageviews (more than 138 per edit) and that the most popular how-to page ("French Kiss") has 1.8 million views—and Popular pages is there, showing 32 pages with at least half a million views (the "least popular" of those being "Make Jello Shots," but #49 at 420K views is much more essential: "Calculate Pi by Throwing Frozen Hot Dogs").
- WeRelate (#12), a genealogy wiki, has **Special pages**—but you have to look a little. Once there, you find most special pages but not **Popular pages**, and overall page views but not the most widely-viewed pages. Understanding that wikindex' ranking isn't entirely based on pageviews, it's interesting that this wiki has had fewer than 7.7 million pageviews—not quite 3% of wikiHow. It's *very* active—there are only 1.3 pageviews per edit! (It's also apparently only two years old, and phenomenally active for such a young wiki.)
- Wookieepedia comes from Wikia, which apparently sets up lots of pop-culture wikis heavily laden with ads. #13 is Halopedia, "the definitive source for *Halo* information." **Special pages** is in small type but it's there—and although **Popular pages** is missing, the **Statis-**

tics page does show pageviews (297,000, less than one per edit—and, astonishingly, less than one for every two registered users, suggesting that the counters have been reset at some point). I do note that individual pages don't show pageviews or most recent edit at the bottom, so the transparency's been clouded a bit.

- On the other hand, #14—WoWWiki, another Wikia wiki devoted to World of Warcraft, *does* have **Popular pages** (renamed "Most popular pages") and the statistics page shows pageviews—but with two oddities: It shows 481.8 million pageviews and says counting has been disabled since mid-2007. And yet, the most popular articles apparently come directly from the database, and #1 has fewer than 5,000 views, with only seven more exceeding 1,000. Clearly, there's a disconnect here.
- A little further down, the humorous Uncyclopedia (#18, which astonishingly, has more than 23,000 articles) doesn't show overall pageviews—and while there's a **Most popular articles** page, it shows no results. Since articles also don't show pageviews, it's anyone's guess as to how often people actually look at Uncyclopedia (yes, it's another Wikia wiki).

You *can* make your wiki more opaque—but why bother? I regard MediaWiki's transparency as a strength, not a weakness. Better to spend your time establishing a user setup methodology that reduces spam as a problem.

With a little awareness, wiki transparency is a good thing. If you're wondering: To the best of my knowledge, all the special pages are available for PALINET Leadership Network. I can't think of many library-related wikis that shouldn't operate with reasonably full transparency. Just be aware that your wiki really *is* transparent.

©3 Perspective

DRM and ISP Surcharges

Remember the basics:

- DRM has been around *longer* than mainstream digital media. Most commercial videocassettes included DRM in the form of Macrovision, deliberate damage to the recorded signal that initially prevented copying movies because of the damage—and continued to "prevent" it because Congress made Macrovision enforcement legal. One question still, as far as I know, hasn't been answered: Is an analog signal-enhancement device (not a recorder) that happens to undo Macrovision damage in the analog domain, thus making videocassettes copyable, legal or not?
- In this precursor case as in almost every other case of commercial DRM, "management" interferes with fair use. Want to use a ten-second clip from a movie as part of an educational commentary? Plausibly legal—but you can't do it without breaking DRM, and that violates DMCA (which ignores fair use entirely).
- While commercial videocassettes and DVDs have always had DRM, audio compact discs never have. An audio "CD" with DRM is *not* a Compact Disc: It violates the standards. On the other hand, most early commercial digital music downloads *did* have DRM, although there have always been download sources that *don't* have DRM (eMusic being one example).
- Print books don't have DRM because they're not digital. A tiny number of print products have attempted to defeat copying through odd color combinations, but the combinations needed to defeat copying also pretty much defeat reading. Many (but not all) commercial ebooks *do* have DRM.
- To the best of my knowledge, nobody has ever demonstrated that DRM helps anybody except the companies that make DRM technology. It's easy to demonstrate that DRM for commercial media hurts citizens by reducing interoperability and increasing the chance of orphaned, useless purchases. I suppose you could say it helps "consumers" because it makes it more likely you'll have to buy the same content over and over and over again, so you consume more…
- DRM does not prevent illegal copying and commercial piracy. It's not clear that DRM even slows down true piracy. At best, it operates as a bizarre form of "speed bump"—hurting those who want to behave ethically while doing no particular damage to those who don't care about ethics and fair play.

Even though far too many citizens go along with DRM at iTunes and elsewhere, there have *always* been vendors of legal MP3 downloads, mostly from independent labels—and MP3 doesn't have DRM. There's a different problem with low-rate MP3 (anything under 195Kbps, and maybe anything under 320Kbps), but it's a sound problem, not a copyright problem.

Now, DRM for purchased downloadable digital music may fade away. Some notes along the path that got us here…

Curtains for music DRM?

That's from Nicholas Carr's *Rough type* (www.roughtype.com) on December 6, 2006 (as I said, this goes back a

ways). He notes a *Wall Street Journal* report that EMI started experimenting with DRM-free MP3 via Yahoo! and suggests the business strategy of DRM "may be reaching the end of its natural life." At the time, iTunes sales seemed to be stalling—and that meant music companies needed alternatives. Alternatives *with* DRM won't play on iPods, which limits commercial potential, but MP3s will. More of what Carr said:

> But won't selling songs as unprotected MP3s lead to rampant illegal copying? No. Because there's already rampant illegal copying. Most unauthorized copying is done either through online file-sharing networks or by burning CDs for friends. DRM schemes have little effect on either of those. All new songs are immediately available on file-sharing networks, DRM or not… People buy through iTunes because they either don't want to engage in illegal trading or can't be bothered with the geeky aspects of illegal trading. It's not because iTunes has removed the option of illegal trading. As for burning CDs to share, that remains easy even with DRM-protected songs.
>
> No, DRM is about controlling the business model for selling online music. And if it looks like there won't be much additional sales growth through iTunes, then music companies are going to start selling unprotected MP3s. In an iPod world, they have little choice.

Actually, the marketplace for non-iPod portable audio devices is still large. Even if iPods take up 70% of the space, there are, I would venture to say, tens of millions of Sansa, Creative and other MP3 players out there, some of which handle Microsoft's DRM system but most of which (I'm asserting) are used almost entirely for DRM-free music. My own Sansa doesn't have *any* downloads, legal or illegal—but I'm a lot more likely to download legal MP3s than I would ever be to download crippled tracks. (There are also a *lot* of "portable digital music players" not included in this discussion, quite possibly more than iPods and competitors combined: Smart phones that are also MP3 players, notebook computers and PDAs.)

Record companies boxed in by their own rhetoric

Ed Felten's commentary, posted January 29, 2007 on *Freedom to tinker* (www.freedom-to-tinker.com), offers an interesting take on why big record companies might be slow to undo DRM: Because they've pushed a "logical" case that boxes them in. Noting that they were, in fact, slow—it took more than a year after EMI's first experiments before the last of the Big Four agreed to offer MP3—here's some of what Felten has to say:

> The record industry has worked for years to frame the DRM issue, with considerable success. Mainstream thinking about DRM is now so mired in the industry's framing that the industry itself will have a hard time explaining and justifying its new course….
>
> [Noting that a New York *Times* news story talked about "releasing music on the Internet with no copying restrictions]: But of course the industry won't sell music "with no copying restrictions" or "unrestricted". The mother of all copying restrictions—copyright law—will still apply and will still restrict what people can do with the music files…
>
> Why did the *Times* (and many commentators) mistake MP3 for "unrestricted"? Because the industry has created a conventional wisdom that (1) MP3 = lawless copying, (2) copyright is a dead letter unless backed by DRM, and (3) DRM successfully reduces copying. If you believe these things, then the fact that copyright still applies to MP3s is not even worth mentioning.
>
> The industry will find these views particularly inconvenient when it is ready to sell MP3s. Having long argued that customers can't be trusted with MP3s, the industry will have to ask the same customers to use MP3s responsibly. Having argued that DRM is necessary to its business—to the point of asking Congress for DRM mandates—it will now have to ask artists and investors to accept DRM-free sales…

Were those issues part of the reason for the slow move to MP3? Perhaps. Would a little hypocrisy stop recording companies from changing course if it appeared likely to be more profitable? Not likely.

Thoughts on music

That's the title of a February 7, 2007 essay by Steve Jobs (www.apple.com/hotnews/thoughtsonmusic/). It's an interesting piece, responding to calls for Apple to open iTunes' DRM system "so that music purchased from iTunes can be played on digital devices purchased from other companies, and protected music purchased from other online music stores can play on iPods."

Jobs points out that iPods *can* play DRM-free music, e.g. AAC and MP3. But, he says, Apple is at the mercy of the "big four" when it comes to distribution:

> When Apple approached these companies to license their music to distribute legally over the Internet, they were extremely cautious and required Apple to protect their music from being illegally copied. The solution was to create a DRM system, which envelopes each song purchased from the iTunes store in special and secret software so that it cannot be played on unauthorized devices.

Poor little Apple apparently had no leverage in the matter—or did it? Jobs brags of "landmark usage rights" it negotiated and calls them unprecedented—but it's worth noting that these provisions support an "unlimited number of iPods" and precisely **zero** competitive portable players.

Jobs describes ways DRM works and the need for secrecy—and how Apple "repairs" FairPlay. That discussion includes one blatantly false statement if eMusic is something other than a myth: "So far we have met our commitments to the music companies to pro-

tect their music, and we have given users the most liberal usage rights available in the industry for legally downloaded music." Jobs apparently doesn't consider eMusic and others that sell MP3s to be part of "the industry." When you control definitions, almost any statement can be true.

Then comes the meat: Jobs explores "three different alternatives for the future." First is competing proprietary DRM systems—and this discussion does seem to imply that, for Jobs, "the industry" consists of Apple, Microsoft and Sony, excluding download vendors that don't use DRM. Jobs is not unhappy with that state: "Customers are being well served with a continuing stream of innovative products and a wide variety of choices."

The second option is to license FairPlay DRM, much as the DRM in DVDs is licensed to hundreds of manufacturers.

> On the surface, this seems like a good idea since it might offer customers increased choice now and in the future. And Apple might benefit by charging a small licensing fee for its FairPlay DRM. However, when we look a bit deeper, problems begin to emerge. The most serious problem is that licensing a DRM involves disclosing some of its secrets to many people in many companies, and history tells us that inevitably these secrets will leak…
>
> Apple has concluded that if it licenses FairPlay to others, it can no longer guarantee to protect the music it licenses from the big four music companies…

Aha. So Apple, that great lover of the open, competitive marketplace, would *love* to license FairPlay to, say, Sandisk and others—but it can't, you see. It's not as though Apple engaged in other closed, proprietary hardware/software systems…

Here's the good part—and a sign that change was on the way:

> The third alternative is to abolish DRMs entirely. Imagine a world where every online store sells DRM-free music encoded in open licensable formats. In such a world, any player can play music purchased from any store, and any store can sell music which is playable on all players. This is clearly the best alternative for consumers, and Apple would embrace it in a heartbeat. If the big four music companies would license Apple their music without the requirement that it be protected with a DRM, we would switch to selling only DRM-free music on our iTunes store. Every iPod ever made will play this DRM-free music.
>
> Why would the big four music companies agree to let Apple and others distribute their music without using DRM systems to protect it? The simplest answer is because DRMs haven't worked, and may never work, to halt music piracy. Though the big four music companies require that all their music sold online be protected with DRMs, these same music companies continue to sell billions of CDs a year which contain completely unprotected music. That's right! No DRM system was ever developed for the CD, so all the music distributed on CDs can be easily uploaded to the Internet, then (illegally) downloaded and played on any computer or player.
>
> In 2006, under 2 billion DRM-protected songs were sold worldwide by online stores, while over 20 billion songs were sold completely DRM-free and unprotected on CDs by the music companies themselves. The music companies sell the vast majority of their music DRM-free, and show no signs of changing this behavior, since the overwhelming majority of their revenues depend on selling CDs which must play in CD players that support no DRM system….

Sure, it's a self-serving document, particularly the second section. Sure, Jobs defines "industry" narrowly so as to exclude the thousands of independent labels (making up a quarter of the music marketplace) who have been working with eMusic and others to make MP3 downloads, legal and lacking DRM, available. But it's still a shot across the bow of RIAA (essentially the big four). And it suggests that Jobs knew the handwriting was on the wall.

How I became a music pirate

"Jarrett" posted this long missive (originally intended for Rhino) that turned up on *The consumerist* on March 20, 2007. Portions:

> I thought I was the music industry's dream consumer.
>
> As a 40 year old male with a long-standing passion for "all things music," I've spent a bundle on my collection…
>
> So here I sit circa 2007 with a house filled with over 1000 vinyl records and around 800 CDs. If you figure about $12 per recording as an…average, that's somewhere around $20,000. Not a bad chunk of change for the music business, I say.
>
> Last week while I was busy importing my CD's into iTunes so I could listen to them on my iPod…I hopped on the internet. iTunes was busy importing a Luna CD, one of my favorite bands, so I decided to see what they were up to… I found a blog site describing a posthumous, internet-only release of a collection of covers the band had recorded throughout their career. While I already had many of the songs…I couldn't resist tracking down this compilation. As I read further on the blog site I encountered a link to a .zip file containing the entire collection ripped as 128kbps mp3's.
>
> While I must admit being tempted to simply click away and download the collection, I thought to myself, "Well, if I buy the music it's only $10, and this way I will get high quality .WAV files. Besides, it's not like Luna were getting rich off of their careers, they could use the money..."
>
> So I headed to Rhino's online store, purchased the music, and downloaded the files.

A little later that evening, I tried to move the .WMA files into iTunes, when I received an error message telling me that iTunes could not import them because they were copy protected. I downloaded the files again (which took another 12 minutes) and again, the same message.

So I called Rhino customer support and after an 8 minute wait spoke with a representative. She informed me that the files were indeed copy protected so that I could only play them on specific music players, most notably not iTunes.

"You don't understand," I said, "These files were not copied or pirated, I actually purchased them."

"Well" she responded, "You didn't actually purchase the files, you really purchased a license to listen to the music, and the license is very specific about how they can be played or listened to."

Now I was baffled. "Records never came with any such restrictions," I said.

She replied, "Well they were supposed to, but we weren't able to enforce those licenses back then, and now we can"

She later went on to explain that I could burn the songs to a CD and listen to them in a regular CD player, but I would need an additional Windows based music player to listen to them on my computer. But either way, she suggested there was no way the files could be played on my iPod.

[Omitted: A remarkable tale of frustration in trying to burn the songs to a CD, including Rhino's advice to *disable firewalls*!]

There I sat, a loyal music fan who has shelled out actual money to a business that is supposed to be having financial problems, and the best they can do is tell me to wander the streets of Seattle looking for different internet providers who might allow me to download the music that I have already paid for, music that I have spent the better part of three house trying to listen to, and which is still unusable?

How on earth have things come to this?!?!?!

Honestly, if this is the best you can do, your business is in really, really serious trouble.

I mean, could you imagine the consumer response if Coke could only be consumed from specific Coke-approved equipment, and then only in the specific ways that the folks at Coke wanted the product to be consumed. "drinking Coke with fast food is no problem, but we must warn you that your license forbids the mixing of Coke with any alcoholic beverages..."

In the end, I never was able to get the music to play on anything—my computer, on a CD or on my iPod. I invested $10, several hours of my time, and my reward was, well, nothing.

I'd like to say I was outraged, but in the end I must admit to feeling remarkably sad and deflated over the whole process. See, the thing is, I was raised on music. I was saved by music. I (used to) live for music. Lester Bangs wasn't my idol, he was my soul mate (in a matter of speaking)…

Since I've resigned myself not to waste any more time with the music business, I suppose I'll have to resort to purchasing used CD's & records, or having my friends occasionally make me a copy of one of their newer CD's.

Call it piracy. Call it whatever you want. But at least I tried. I gave you several chances and you failed miserably at every level.

Note the customer "service" representative's comment (emphasis added): Someone at Rhino believes that CDs aren't supposed to be covered by first-sale rights. By my lights, buying a used CD is absolutely *not* piracy. On the other hand, I have to disagree with *The Consumerist*'s lead line for this essay:

> Does DRM drive even honest well-meaning people to piracy? Yes, of course it does.

To distraction? Yes. To piracy? I suppose if you're a "consumerist"—if your whole life revolves around consumption—then maybe. Otherwise—well, I note that the writer lists casual infringement (not commercial piracy or even infringing P2P downloading) as the last way he's likely to get music.

EMI's Big Move and Beyond

EMI may have experimented earlier, but on April 2, 2007, it announced the big move. EMI would continue to sell DRM-locked music on iTunes with current mediocre sound quality (128K AAC) at current prices—but would start offering unprotected AAC tracks, at twice the bitrate (256K) for a little more money ($1.29 per track). Album purchases would move to "premium" sound quality and DRM-free status—and, in a surprisingly consumer-friendly move, people who already owned DRM-locked tracks from EMI would be able to upgrade to better-sounding unprotected tracks for the difference in price ($0.30 per track).

EMI was adding similar provisions to its other outlets. The press release referred to the earlier experiment, where a few popular tracks were made available for sale in MP3 form.

One discussion of the move included information about just how many people were buying from iTunes in early 2007, when the common wisdom seemed to be that we all got all our music digitally: "Forrester found that only 3% of U.S. online households buy anything from iTunes, and one-third of iTunes buyers make 80% of the purchases."

Ed Felten commented on the move in an April 3, 2007 *Freedom to tinker* post. Excerpts:

> This is a huge step forward for EMI and the industry. Given the consumer demand for DRM-free music, and

> the inability of DRM to stop infringement, it was only a matter of time before the industry made this move. But there was considerable reluctance to take the first step, partly because a generation of industry executives had backed DRM-based strategies. The industry orthodoxy has been that DRM (a) reduces infringement a lot, and (b) doesn't lower customer demand much. But EMI must disbelieve at least one of these two propositions; if not, its new strategy is irrational. (If removing DRM increases piracy a lot but doesn't create many new customers, then it will cost EMI money.) Now that EMI has broken the ice, the migration to DRM-free music can proceed, to the ultimate benefit of record companies and law-abiding customers alike.
>
> Still, it's interesting how EMI and Apple decided to do this. The simple step would have been to sell only DRM-free music, at the familiar $0.99 price point, or perhaps at a higher price point. Instead, the companies chose to offer two versions, and to bundle DRM-freedom with higher fidelity, with a differentiated price 30% above the still-available original.
>
> Why bundle higher fidelity with DRM-freedom? It seems unlikely that the customers who want higher fidelity are the same ones who want DRM-freedom… Given the importance of the DRM issue to the industry, you'd think they would want good data on customer preferences, such as how many customers will pay thirty cents more to get DRM-freedom. By bundling DRM-freedom with another feature, the new offering will obscure that experiment…
>
> One effect of selling DRM-free music will be to increase the market for complementary products that make other (lawful) uses of music. Examples include non-Apple music players, jukebox software, collaborative recommendation systems, and so on… (Complements will multiply and improve, which over time will make DRM-free music even more attractive to consumers. This process will take some time, so the full benefits of the new strategy to EMI won't be evident immediately…
>
> The growth of complements will also increase other companies' incentives to sell DRM-free music. And each company that switches to DRM-free sales will only intensify this effect, boosting complements more and making DRM-free sales even more attractive to the remaining holdout companies. Expect a kind of tipping effect among the major record companies. This may not happen immediately, but over time it seems pretty much inevitable…

This all sounds right (not an unusual observation when quoting Ed Felten)—and, in the long run, it probably was right. EMI is one of the smallest of the big four; maybe it makes sense that EMI would be the first to move (ever so slightly) away from DRM.

Music to my ears

That's the title on Tom Peters' May 20, 2007 post at *ALA TechSource* (www.techsource.ala.org). He notes EMI's earlier move (which became fully effective in May) and another move from another source:

> Last week Amazon.com announced that later this year it will launch a downloadable digital music service that will feature DRM-free music playable on any device. EMI, the fourth largest music company in the U.S. market and one that has been struggling financially of late, has decided to shoot the rapids and sign a deal with Amazon to supply nearly its entire catalog only in DRM-free format.
>
> This one-two punch from Apple (whose iTunes store is the current leader in downloadable digital music) and Amazon (the current leader in online CD sales) may knockout and retire DRM.
>
> If DRM is cruisin' for a bruisin' the question becomes: How will it fall?...

Peters expresses the hope that all other forms of DRM will disappear.

Imagine no restrictions…

Sarah Houghton-Jan published "Imagine no restrictions: Digital rights management" in the June 1, 2007 *School Library Journal* (www.schoollibraryjournal.com/article/CA6448189.html?q=imagine+no+restrictions). It's a good brief introduction to DRM, how it affects libraries, and how library staff can deal with DRM-related patron questions. Excerpts:

> As an example, let's take a piece of music, "Imagine" by John Lennon. Lennon's estate and his record company own the original creative content of that song. The rights owners want to be compensated for that content, rather than give it away for free. So the rights owners sell a physical package, like CDs, which contain "Imagine" as a file. The CDs may be labeled with warnings about copyright law, but the files themselves, the CDAs (CD Audio), contain no DRM. The rights owners also sell a digital version of "Imagine" as a file via the online retailer iTunes. This file is not a simple sound file (as on the CD), but rather another file type, in this case, AAC (advanced audio coding). Along with the song, this file type carries a snippet of DRM code. Therein lies the inequity. If you buy a physical version of a song or movie, you are warned about the law, but generally trusted to follow it. If you buy a digital version, however, the DRM code forces compliance.

There's an editing error in the next paragraph, I think, saying "DRM makes it illegal for the owner of that CD to use that content on more than one device." That's not true for CDs—and not even true for Apple's FairPlay and some other DRM systems.

Houghton-Jan offers three main reasons libraries should care about DRM: Device compatibility (any user should be able to use library content), DRM roadblocks (DRM can get in the way of using content quite apart from device incompatibility) and archival

issues (DRM-laden content has a tendency to "disappear" over time). Her discussions are excellent. She calls for libraries to be part of the solution and to demand DRM-free content from all vendors. She also offers recommendations for library staff to use when discussing DRM with patrons. Among them:

- Explain that DRM is not something the library has imposed on the content, but something we have to agree to in order to provide any downloadable content at all.
- Emphasize which econtent collections are compatible with all devices and operating systems.
- Explain why certain content is not compatible…
- Encourage users to write to your econtent vendors and to Microsoft and Apple, asking to remove DRM on the content they offer or, at the very least, for a universally compatible DRM scheme that will work with their devices (read: iPods)…

Other developments in DRM and music

Why "and music"? Because there have been no steps away from DRM for DVDs or Blu-ray.

A few milestones (mostly from *Ars Technica*, arstechnica.com):

- June 20, 2007: EMI says "DRM-free music is noticeably more popular than DRMed music"—e.g., *Dark Side of the Moon* has been selling more than three times as well since going DRM-free.
- August 9, 2007: Universal Music Group—largest of the Big Four—announced a test run for DRM-free sales on Amazon and elsewhere, but not iTunes. Tracks would be the usual $0.99 and bitrate would be up to the service, as high as 256K MP3 in some cases.
- September 25, 2007: Amazon launched its music download store with more than two million songs, all MP3 (thus DRM-free), including EMI, Universal and 20,000 independent labels. Most tracks are 256K and sell for $0.99, but the most popular songs cost a little less.
- October 15, 2007: Apple announced plans to drop "iTunes Plus" prices (the higher bitrate unprotected versions) to $0.99, matching the DRM price, and to add some independent music labels.
- November 9, 2007: A digital music service in the UK, 7 Digital, announced that 80% of its sales were of DRM-free content.
- December 2, 2007: Deutsche Grammophon, one of the most respected classical labels (and a subsidiary of Universal), announced a plan to drop DRM—and sell 320K MP3 files on its own store. (320K is the highest bitrate supported for MP3.)
- December 27, 2007: Warner Music announced that it would offer its complete catalog in DRM-free MP3 form on Amazon.
- January 10, 2008: The last shoe fell. Amazon announced that Sony BMG would make its songs and albums available in MP3 form through Amazon.

What's notable at this point: Pretty much everybody—all four of the big companies and thousands of independent labels—was (is) willing to sell unprotected music via Amazon, but only EMI signed up to do so via iTunes. That situation has nothing to do with copyright and a whole lot to do with who did and didn't have leverage in Apple's dealings with record labels.

It's fair to say that, while DRM for music isn't entirely dead, it's on life support for *purchased* (as opposed to rented) music—and that's a good thing for almost everyone involved, probably including musicians and publishing companies. Elsewhere? Unclear.

Guaranteeing RIAA Profits?

Here's the twist: Some folks are suggesting a "music surcharge" for broadband accounts. The Electronic Frontier Foundation floated this idea in 2003—as a *voluntary* $5 surcharge that would guarantee you wouldn't be sued by the RIAA. EFF continues to support the idea and now Jim Griffin, a "digital strategy consultant," is working with some of the big record companies to push a similar idea.

Theoretically, it's not a terrible idea. A "voluntary collective license" could encourage ethical downloaders and reward musicians. But it's not that simple. For example:

- Would money go to a broad range of artists and publishers, or would file sampling result in the big four and a few already-wealthy artists getting essentially all of the fees?
- What would "voluntary" mean? Would broadband users have the choice of buying broadband *with* unlimited P2P or *without*?

You can find EFF's enthusiastic whitepaper on the subject at www.eff.org/wp/better-way-forward-voluntary-collective-licensing-music-file-sharing. Ed Felten seems to like the idea as well. You'll find his recent posts—and a *lot* of comments—on April 2, 2008 and April 25, 2008 at www.freedom-to-tinker.com. Rethan Salam describes it in an April 25, 2008 story at *Slate*: "The music industry's extortion scheme." (www.slate.com/id/2189888) Michael Arrington of TechCrunch doesn't like the idea either—partly because he assumes it won't really *be* voluntary. Frankly, neither do I. (Oddly, although it appears Salam doesn't think it will be voluntary, he *likes*

the idea because "something like the music tax simply has to happen." Salam wants a *real* music tax levied by the Federal government on *all* broadband subscribers—with revenue going directly to musicians.)

Salam concludes, "What's not to like?" Well, sez I, for one: I don't wish to be billed $60 a year (as a starting point—it certainly won't go *down*) to get music I don't want. I don't buy that a "massive Nielsen-style sample" will actually mean that a broad range of musicians will be rewarded; the "long tail" doesn't work well in a sampling system where sampling is less than 100%.

Felten objects to the "extortion" label in Salam's title by saying "if this is extortion, then all of copyright is extortion." But that's nonsense. Copyright doesn't require me or anyone else to buy a certain amount of goods whether I want them or not. Quite a few commenters on Felten's post had the same problem: They saw that this license wasn't likely to be all that voluntary and that $5 was likely to be just a starting point.

The idea has been around for a long time. A truly voluntary scheme might have its merits. I'll admit to being skeptical about this one. It looks like a guaranteed free ride for companies that seem more interested in suing their customers than in finding music that we actually want to listen to—and will pay for.

Perspective

On Semantics, Reality, Learning and Rockstars

A guest post appeared recently on a high-profile liblog, discussing a sometimes-controversial name and set of topics. The blogger dismissed a range of people and criticisms with the following sentence:

> It is unfortunate that these critics concern themselves with semantics, while those who are on the so-called bandwagon are working in the spirit of creativity and communication.

Set aside that the writer appears to be saying critics are *not* acting in the spirit of creativity and communication. That's such an outrageous stance it's hard to take seriously. Critics include several who are certainly as creative and communicative as anyone on the "so-called bandwagon."

What about the first phrase? Since there's an implied opposition here, I can only assume that communication and semantics are somehow at odds.

The short definition of "semantics," according to Merriam-Webster's *10th Collegiate* (and Merriam-Webster Online), is "the study of meanings." For a more "Web 2.0" version, *Wikipedia* defines semantics as "the study of meaning in communication." Those old fogeys at *Britannica.com* call it "the philosophical and scientific study of meaning."

So what the blogger is actually saying is:

> It is unfortunate that these critics concern themselves with the study of meaning in communication, while those who are on the so-called bandwagon are working in the spirit of creativity and communication.

What an interesting opposition. Apparently, we should not care what communication *means*, only that it *occurs*. I went to college at UC Berkeley in the '60s, and I'd guess some of my classmates could groove on that concept after the right doses of mind-clarifying substances: "Man, who cares what it *means*? Just *say* it!"

When someone attempts to dismiss semantics as irrelevant or somehow less than human, my back goes up. To a humanist and particularly to a former rhetoric major, them's fighting words. Parrots can say words. People associate those words with meaning. In a real sense, semantics is a big part of what makes us human.

Reading charitably

I know I should read the post charitably. In the same pile of source material is "Charity," an April 23, 2008 post by Jenica Rogers-Urbanek at *Attempting elegance*. Rogers-Urbanek quotes *Wikipedia* on the philosophical concept of charity in understanding, as follows:

> The four principles are:
> 1. The other uses words in the ordinary way;
> 2. The other makes true statements;
> 3. The other makes valid arguments;
> 4. The other says something interesting.

What can we say here?

- The ordinary meaning of "semantics" is "the study of meaning" or "the study of meaning in communications."
- Given that meaning, the sentence is either oxymoronic or nonsensical. Either of which means there is no valid argument—and it's hard to interpret that as interesting.

My own naïve interpretation of "charitable reading" doesn't use those four principles. Instead, it could be summarized as "Assuming good intentions on the part of the writer, intentions that may be betrayed by imperfect writing." In this case, that means assuming the writer intended to say something meaningful and constructive.

That doesn't work either. The sentence *clearly* attempts to dismiss all but one view of a contentious area by trivializing criticism. I can find no way to read the sentence constructively. It's a handwave, pure and simple—but as a handwave, it's betrayed by a failure to understand the meaning of the word "semantics."

If the intention is to dismiss critics by saying the *name* doesn't matter, the writer should have used "terminology" rather than "semantics." And the problem with that is that some critics object to the name because we don't think there's a *thing* that it names. Calling "it" something else—"Sam," for example—wouldn't help. There still wouldn't be a *there* there. In fact, it is *not* an argument about choice of words: that part of the argument is about *meaning*. It *is* semantics—and that's a good thing to consider, for anyone who calls themselves a librarian.

Reading skeptically

While I think charitable reading is a great idea, as long as it's applied to all of us, not just those on one side of a discussion, I believe a big chunk of communication needs to be read *un*charitably: advertising, spam, phishing, most political communications. For those communications, you need skeptical reading, with these assumptions:

1. The writer manipulates words with little regard for semantics;
2. The writer makes statements that may (or may not) be factual but may not be true;
3. The writer makes arguments that *appear* logical;
4. The writer says something intended to catch your attention.

None of which has anything to do with the "semantics" handwave just discussed, but might serve as the bridge to the second in this cluster of mini-perspectives (for that is what this is).

Learning

One unfortunate undercurrent in the various discussions surrounding change and continuity has to do with lifelong learning for library people. Why "unfortunate"? I'll get to that shortly: This is really a blog post disguised as part of a PERSPECTIVE to gain wider readership.

On one hand, you get people saying every librarian needs to learn A and B and C and…well, you know, into the dozens. The answer to that is generally **Nonsense**, for several reasons:

- While each library above a certain size may need to have *someone* familiar with each item in a list, that doesn't mean *every person* or *every professional* in the library needs to be familiar with every item. Very few cataloging gurus assert that every reference librarian and every rural/small library director needs intimate familiarity with RDA. It's equally reasonable to suggest that some technical services librarians don't need to be able to install wikis.
- For many of us, detailed learning substantially before the point of use is mostly wasted. We forget details and maybe even broad strokes. How's your calculus these days? We need to be able to find out what we need to know *when* (or ideally, shortly before) *we need to know it*. Nothing new here either. One new thing, maybe: Some things that we're told everybody needs to learn almost certainly will disappear or become irrelevant before many of us have the chance to put that learning to use. (How's your understanding of Gopher navigation techniques? Updated your Orkut and Friendster profiles lately?)
- Most of us don't have time to learn everything that might be useful for us, just as most of us don't have time to keep up with as much formal and informal literature as might serve us well.

But there's a huge caveat here. A **huge** caveat:

You don't have to learn everything—but you do need to keep learning *something*.

Dorothea Salo objects to the comment "I don't have time to learn all this!" She's been writing about difficulties getting librarians to pay attention to issues that *do* affect them and notes this as one response. (The post is also about different learning styles—the notion that some people learn better in a "steady stream" of daily reading while others prefer the "single spray" method, attending a conference or workshop to pick up a lot of stuff at one point. I think she makes an excellent point—people needing to spread the word in some important areas may need to make more effort to reach those who primarily learn at conferences. All I have to say about the post as a whole is "I agree." I'm expanding on one comment here.)

I can think of a way to hear that comment charitably, although I suspect it's being a little *too* charitable. If a person is saying, "I don't have time to learn **all** this," that may sometimes be right: The person simply may not have room (time, focus, concentration) for a big learning agenda at the moment. But I don't believe that's what Salo's objecting to, and I don't think that's what's usually being said. What I hear, a bit less charitably, is "I don't have time to learn **any of** this," which translates to "I don't think I need to keep learning."

And that is simply not acceptable for anyone who calls themselves professional.

You don't have to learn everything—but you do need to keep learning *something*.

So why did I say unfortunate? Because it's easy to conflate two "don't have time to learn" situations:

- **This is too much for me to take in all at once, and some of it doesn't apply right now**

or soon enough for me to retain the learning. That's frequently valid and leaves room to find a comfort level, where learning appears more directly useful and doesn't require loads of energy.

- **I've learned enough. I don't want to learn any more.** *Not acceptable*. Not acceptable for professional librarians—and, I believe, not acceptable for anyone working long-term in the library field, professional or otherwise. That attitude wouldn't be acceptable for doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers or accountants. Why should it be acceptable for library people?

Maybe this does loop back to the first discussion, which was (of course) about "Library 2.0." Consider the very first paragraph of the very first page of *Balanced Libraries: Thoughts on Continuity and Change:*

> A library system that stands still is unbalanced and headed for trouble. A library staff obsessed with Hot New Things and aiming for new users at the expense of familiar services and existing patrons is unbalanced and headed for trouble. Very few libraries fall into either extreme, but sometimes it seems as though we're urged toward one extreme.

Maybe I'm naïve here as well. I doubt that there are any significant numbers of libraries that look like the second strawman—but I wonder how many libraries (that is, library staffs) really do, to all intents and purposes, appear to be standing still? Let's set this out as an opposition as well:

- **I don't want to sign up for the whole set of stuff called Library 2.0**. You get no argument from me. Maybe your library shouldn't be gaming. Maybe your patrons wouldn't respond to social networking initiatives. Maybe you don't have the staff to maintain a blog and don't have any problem for which a wiki is a solution.
- **I don't want any of this Library 2.0 stuff. Our library's fine, just fine. We don't need to examine our operations, find better ways to stay in touch with our community or consider new technologies to support our routines.** Now you get a *big* argument from me. I'm all for continuity, but continuity without awareness and change isn't continuity: It's rigidity—easily confused with rigor mortis. Even the smallest library staff needs to step back from time to time to look at how things are going, whether the library's serving and effectively involving its community, and whether new tools could improve situations. Think you're too small? The Wetmore Public Library (Kansas) and Seldovia Public Library (Alaska) serve communities of 362 people and 286 people respectively. Both libraries use blogs to good effect—to create an online presence they almost certainly couldn't provide otherwise.

You don't have to do it all (just as you may not be able to have it all). But you do have to do something—or at least make sure that you're doing the best you can. That involves lifelong learning. That's one of many things good public libraries support, and it's an essential aspect of being a good library person.

I'm preaching to the choir—but maybe you can pass this particular sermon along to those who might think that old traditionalist Crawford is saying it's OK for them to do nothing at all. They're wrong.

When is a Book Not a Book?

If you've never heard of the *Annals of Improbable Research*, you should. The slogan: "Research that makes people LAUGH and then THINK." Or maybe it's "The journal of record for inflated research and personalities." AIR is home of the Ig Nobel prizes and the Luxuriant Flowing Hair Club for Scientists. Publications include the magazine and the *mini-AIR* newsletter. The primary site is http://improbable.com, which is also the address of AIR's blog, *Improbable research*.

All of which is preface to some items that appeared on that blog regarding the world's most prolific author, Philip M. Parker. He's written more than 85,000 books—or maybe it's more than 200,000. Except that one could reasonably raise two objections, the second maybe more interesting than the first:

- The process Parker invented (and, naturally, patented) to create these books can only be called authorship by an extremely broad definition. A book-writing machine writes the books, and even "writing" may not be the proper term for what appears to be an assembly process.
- It's not clear how many of these books *exist*, since they're not actually assembled—much less printed—until there's an order. In other words, there may be more than 200,000 *titles*, but it's not clear how many of those titles have ever resulted in printed pages bound in book form (or final PDFs purchased as downloads).

The magazine is now open access (it wasn't always), although you don't get high-res images in what AIR calls the "free, cheesy low-res PDF format" or the "low-res images and minimal formatting" HTML versions. (This isn't a traditional scholarly journal, and in any case the subscription price for the bimonthly is only $25 a year for PDF, $35 for mailed print.) The March-April 2008 issue, a special issue on writing research, runs 36 pages in PDF form. That includes four related articles on the remarkable work of Dr. Parker: "How to write 85,000 books," "Dr. Parker's

latent library and the death of the author," "Dr. Parker's bird books," and "May we recommend: Parker titles." (Two of the four articles are by Ig Nobel winners—generally serious scholars who don't take themselves too seriously.)

You should read the whole section and think about the reality of latent books and machine "authorship." (What the heck, you can continue on to a more, um, *typical* article: "How to write an interdisciplinary research paper: planning for retirement by solving time travel paradoxes using open book management in nearby disk galaxies," by Eric Schulman, Eric Schulman, Eric Schulman and Eric Schulman—an odd article written (or assembled?) by four authors with the same name.

But I digress—which happens a lot when you start messing with *AIR*. Back to Philip M. Parker. He's only been "writing" these books for about five years. The books can be extremely short or very long—e.g., *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Bathroom Toilet Brushes and Holders* is 677 pages, but it also sells for $495, while *The 2007 Import and Export Market for Electrical Relays Used with Circuits of Up to 1,000 Volts in Ireland*—apparently Parker's best seller on Amazon on May 1, 2008—sells for a mere $66 (but it's only 34 pages).

Parker wrote three books the "old-fashioned way," but that's so slow. Meanwhile, as the first of the four articles notes, he's "written" 188 books on shoes, 10 on ships, 219 on wax... and he apparently plans to use his "writing" system to create video programs and video games by the hundreds or thousands. He makes a case for the social benefit of his writing machine (basically a set of algorithms and a whole bunch of databases):

> If I am lucky, this will allow the creation of content (educational material, books, software, etc.) for languages (or for subject areas) that simply do not have enough speakers, or economies that can support traditional publishing or content creation. For example, in health care, some diseases have fewer than 1,000 people who get the disease worldwide per year. Of those, only 1 or 2 might want a reference book. Using this method, the break even for a book is 1 copy, with no inventory cost (all books are either printed on demand, or distributed via ebook).

Parker says it costs about $0.23 to "write" each book.

Latent books

The second article in the cluster on Parker is the most impressive. Chris McManus' philosophical inquiry goes way beyond boring old pomo literary criticism:

> The really interesting question about someone who has been described as "the most prolific author in history" now concerns the trickier question of whether, in any meaningful sense, this author—or what Barthes would call a "scriptor"—has ever actually been alive.

Not whether there is a person named Philip M. Parker, but whether there is an author for these books—and whether you can call most of them books:

> In most or perhaps even nearly all cases these books seem never to have been printed, seen by their ostensible publisher, or seen by a single reader. Maybe there are even titles that have never been clicked upon on Amazon.com. Now that really is post-modern.

Most Lulu authors order their own copy before approving a book for sale. CreateSpace appears to require that you do so. Parker's Icon Publishing is doing something else: The many titles appear mostly to consist of books that don't yet exist, that will come into being—not only the print pages within a cover, but the sequence of words that could be called the text—only after they've been ordered. McManus takes one "book" at random, the $56 28-page paperback, *The 2007 Import and Export Market for Wool Grease, Fatty Substances Derived from Wool Grease, and Lanolin Excluding Crude Wool Grease in Brazil*. McManus couldn't find it in any library and there's no indication that anyone's ever purchased it.

> There lurks a philosophical conundrum. As with the tree that falls to the ground in a lonely forest, unheard by any sentient being, can it be said to make a sound? Or in the koan's 21th century form, if such a title evokes from Google the response 'did not match any documents," does it exist?

There's more to the utterly charming story. And, of course, there are ever more books from Parker.

You're on your own for the last two articles—one focusing on Parker's bird-related books and one offering a few highlights and noting Amazon reviews for a handful of Parker books. I should note that some of the co"authored" books on medical conditions *have* sold hundreds or thousands of copies. They may very well offer good value to those who buy them. So, for that matter, might thousands of books that are never purchased by more than one entity. And, after all, who can resist a title like *The 2007-2012 World Outlook for Hip-Hop Ringtones*? (235 pages, $795, no sales information at Amazon, "two new and used copies"—but they're both from divisions of Amazon.

You're waiting for me to relate this to the first two mini-perspectives? For that, you'll have to buy *2008-2012 Regional Outlook for Misleading Connections between Libraries and Innovative Publishing in North America*. It costs $795. Let me know if you'd like to order it.

Rockstars and the Rest of Us

Now that we're dealing with matters of high import, why not take a quick look at a conversation of sorts

that took place in five posts on five liblogs over four days—except that I see an interesting precursor two months earlier on a sixth liblog (and I'm sure there are related branches elsewhere). To encourage charitable reading, I'm going to add a couple of notes up front:

- Although I don't believe I've met all of them in person, I regard all six of these libloggers as friends—and the best kind of friends: Those who don't always agree with me (or vice-versa) and who make me think, sometimes causing me to change my mind. They're all articulate, they all have things to say that are worth saying, I try to read all of them carefully.
- I'm not a library rockstar by any plausible definition, although I'm also far from invisible. There have been times when I felt bad about the first half of that sentence. *I was wrong.*

Let's skim through these notes with just a little added commentary.

"the road you take don't always lead you home"

Here's how Jenica Rogers-Urbanek put it in this February 3, 2008 post at *Attempting elegance* (rogersurbanek.wordpress.com):

> Once upon a time when I was a baby librarian, my first boss made noises about how I could publish things to get tenure, or I could do local and regional committee work instead. The implication in her encouragement of the regional path was that serious publishing was out of the range of a technical services librarian at an institution of our size, and thus I thought that getting published in The Literature was the pinnacle of awesomeness.

Now? Her complimentary copies of *portal* with her latest article arrive—and she's proud, but it's not a life-changing event. And she's not just writing articles:

> I'm also working with the fantastic Amanda Etches-Johnson, Jason Griffey, Chad Boeninger, and Meredith Farkas on the Academic Library 2.0 preconference at Computers in Libraries. While small, it's still a national conference, presenting with people I respect a great deal, about fascinating and cool stuff. That version of me who didn't know how to look beyond running regional training sessions on using Innovative's serials module and chairing the local cataloging standards committee… she'd be stunned by where I stand now, and the things I'm doing. She'd think it was outstanding.
>
> **It feels normal**… In one sense, it's just who I am and who I've grown into as I've moved through my professional life—I can present with ease, I think I have something useful to say, and my professional writing skills continue to improve. My confidence in my abilities, knowledge, and perspective has increased, and thus I've learned to value my opinions and want to offer them to others to consider and dissect as a contribution to the field. On the other hand, I've also become utterly jaded in the knowledge that we're all just winging it—those people I hold up as 'experts,' 'rock stars' and 'leaders'? I know now that they're all making it up as they go along, too, just drawing on their own self-confidence in their learning, knowing, and doing to share with others as they're able. [Emphasis added.]
>
> So here I am. Contributing to the field, writing for publication, jumping through hoops and fighting the good fight. It feels less important than it did with my star-spangled newbie eyes…but it's still pretty satisfying.

As I commented at the time, specifically referring to the last three sentences in the next-to-last paragraph: "Ah, grasshopper, you have learned the essential lesson and stated it nicely."

Maybe that's all there is to be said. If you have things to offer, you should try offering them—and realize that, to some extent, we're *all* making it up as we go along. But that isn't all there is to be said, which brings us two months forward to:

The monkey song (with a hat tip to Louis Prima)

By most library standards, Meredith Farkas *is* a rockstar, or close to it. Some of what she has to say about all this, from her April 20, 2008 post at *Information wants to be free* (meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/), with [interpolations] to save space and with great examples omitted (the original's much better reading):

> Every few months, I get an email from someone in library school or a new librarian basically asking me how I've accomplished all that I have [outside of work] in this profession in three years and how they can do the same. It's an awkward question to answer, because there are always so many factors that come into play to create success, and a lot of them (the luck, the right place/right time, and the knowing the right people elements) are difficult to replicate… Frankly, I can't explain how it all happened myself… [But I'll try.]
>
> I may be wrong, but I think that most of the people who end up "movers and shakers" in the profession…didn't explicitly try to become movers and shakers. I started blogging because I had strong opinions and a lot of ideas about the profession, and I wasn't having the sort of discussions I'd hoped for in library school. Blogging helped me process my own ideas and, eventually, got discussions started between me and other people interested in the same things. I think when you do something out of a passion for it, it shows. When you do something because you want to get noticed or you want accolades, there's a very strong possibility it won't happen… My experiences with these people tells me that most of them are extremely genuine and committed to contributing to the profession.
>
> [Some cases] also point to something else: seeing an unfilled need and filling it…I created the ALA Chicago Wiki in 2005 because I was frustrated by the lack of information about the conference other than what ALA was putting out.. I would have been tickled if just a few libra-

> rians had added their two cents (better than me just putting in what I know), but the wiki received thousands and thousands of edits by hundreds of librarians. It ended up becoming this incredibly rich guide to the conference because of the efforts of so many people. It exceeded my wildest dreams. That wiki (and the Library Success Wiki) led to my being noticed by a number of influential bloggers and folks at WebJunction… [and resulted in various other opportunities]… There are still so many unfilled needs in the profession. It just takes someone who notices a need and is willing to put in the time.
>
> And time is what all this takes… We spend our free time writing, speaking, and networking online with folks who have similar professional interests. We often spend our own money to go to conferences in our areas of interest. ..
>
> So I guess my advice is to focus on what you are passionate about and have the guts to put yourself out there… Most of all, be great at your job. While I'm happy with all the things I've done outside of work, I'm most proud of the things I've accomplished at my 9 to 5 job… Being great at what you do and balancing that with other contributions to the profession is what will make you advance…

Skipping over the comments that, one way or another, agree with Farkas, it's worth quoting part of Steven Bell's comment: "Passion is important but you also need a good idea and the ability to communicate it to others in a 'sticky' way—so it's memorable."

I'm not going to poke holes in Farkas' discussion, partly because I agree with most of it. I wrote my first (and, for a long time, my most important) book because there was a need that nobody else seemed ready to fill. I wasn't *ready* to spend my own money on conferences (still don't), which doubtless limited opportunities—but I did spend my own time and money on this ejournal, and that's had interesting and surprising results.

But still…there's a little more to it.

The wrong goal?

That's Greg Schwartz' title for this April 20, 2008 *Open stacks* post (openstacks.net/os/). He extracts an indirect question from Farkas' post and responds in part:

> The ultimate question from the post: "What advice would you offer a new librarian looking to start speaking, writing and networking on a national level?"
>
> There's a part of me that says they have the wrong goal in mind (excepting the networking part). As Meredith said, most people who are seen as movers and shakers didn't set out to be movers and shakers.
>
> But there's the other part of me that says there aren't any barriers to writing on a national or global level, so what's the issue? Just do it. That's how I got started. There are so very few impediments to self-publishing online that it's unfathomable that anyone who wants to be writing isn't doing it.
>
> But as I said, I'm not sure I can recommend focusing on speaking and writing as a goal in and of itself for the new librarian. Following the sage wisdom of Walt Crawford, first have something to say. Figure out what gets you excited in the profession (or outside of it!) and write about it. Get that blog started. Share your passion. Share your experiences. But remember that the writing, while immensely valuable, is not the experience itself, at least not for most newbies…
>
> If I can be said to be on the right path to "making a name for myself" in library land, I attribute it to two things: good timing and, exactly as Meredith said, "seeing an unfilled need and filling it."…
>
> [Schwartz recounts his good timing in making liblogs known and in being an early library podcaster.]
>
> …In the end, I agree with Meredith: Writing and speaking have been benefits of being passionate, curious, motivated and willing to put myself out there. I didn't set out to be a writer/speaker. I still don't think of myself that way. In fact, one of the main draws of librarianship was the opportunity to "do the research and not write the paper." But that's a different blog post for another day.

Schwartz identifies *timing* as an issue. It's not always straightforward, but it is significant. While this post is, to some extent, an extended comment on Farkas' post, it's worth reading on its own—as are the two comments. The second, from Connie Crosby raises an interesting point, one with which I'm acutely familiar:

> The blogging and the speaking and the writing on a national level do not translate into success or reward on the job [with rare exceptions]. The job success is its own separate pursuit that requires just as much care and attention.

Crosby isn't wild about this reality: "If you are seen as having expertise in the profession by most of you colleagues, it should translate into expertise on the job. You'd think." Wouldn't you?

Notoriety

Dorothea Salo's April 22, 2008 post at *Caveat lector* (cavlec.yarinareth.net) adds more to the story Farkas tells. Excerpts:

> I am not a rock star in librarianship. Meredith and I both have second master's, graduated at the same time, got jobs at the same time, blogged about getting jobs at the same time, got interested in social software at the same time (well, okay, I started blogging first, but that's irrelevant)—and she's a rock star and I'm not. Let's pick through that a moment.
>
> First of all, everything in Meredith's post is absolutely true… Second of all, I don't think Meredith and I are all that far apart in raw talent…. Third of all, I've done nearly everything Meredith mentions. (Including spend money, gah. Like water sometimes.) Nobody's ever accused me of a lack of passion!
>
> But for me, that didn't turn out to be enough. Hmmmm.

> Let's be frank. Some of it is right-place-right-time-right-topic caprice. The spotlight hit wikis just as Meredith did. She didn't plan that; she couldn't have… As for me, institutional repositories don't have a spotlight, and very likely never will. So I could make all the right moves…. and still never be a rockstar. Nota bene, this is not an argument about who "deserves" rockstardom, not least because I find such arguments virulently poisonous; it's an argument about who gets it, and a plea to people not to beat themselves up if they don't. Sometimes it's really, truly not you.
>
> [A discussion of appearance, ethnicity and sex follows. I don't deny any of it, but I'm skipping it.]
>
> Certain demeanor expectations also operate in the rockstar realm. Library rockstars are, logically enough, what we think librarians ought to be: genial, fun, optimistic, helpful, gregarious, pleasant people—but not too in-your-face about anything…[and not deeply anti-establishment]. Think about the library rockstars you know, and see if I'm not mostly right. Now me, I violate these norms regularly onblog, on-mailing-list, and in my speaking and writing. I don't see how there can be any doubt in this world that it's made me an unlikely candidate for rockstardom.
>
> I'm not alone. I have good friends in librarianship who are just that leetle bit too iconoclastic to be rockstars… They find their places, most of them, as I've found mine; sometimes very high places... More power to 'em; sometimes a damn good hole-poking skeptic is worth a dozen rockstars. But sometimes they chafe. Sometimes I chafe. Rockstars tend to keep their chafing to themselves, or to a tight circle of friends…
>
> Look, folks, rockstardom isn't the only face of success… In spite of everything, I am quite as successful as I need or want to be. I found work in my heart's home. When I need to say something serious about what I do, I can get it said and hearkened to, here or even (to my own surprise) in The Literature… In spite of the people I've alienated (and they are not few), I have my own network of well-loved colleagues and friends; I've never been lonely in this marvelous profession…
>
> Most of all, I have the luxury of defining success for myself. I fully and freely acknowledge that non-tenure-track academic librarianship has its discontents, but they pale to insignificance beside the phenomenal freedom of picking my own goalposts…

Maybe I should quote the entire post, noting that I'm not ready to argue against *any* of it. At one point, I thought she might be referring to me in a parenthetical comment, but I don't think that's true. As to what I *did* include, I believe it adds to Farkas' story in a way that's worth hearing.

I regard Salo as *important* in the subfield of open access related to library-governed institutional repositories, and in open access as a whole. That may not make her a rockstar. It does make her nationally and internationally significant. She's already accomplished much, and I expect her to accomplish more. But rockstar? Probably not.

she started to sing as she tackled the thing

So says Laura Crossett in an April 24, 2008 post at *lis.dom* (www.newrambler.net/lisdom/). She comments on Farkas' post (which mentions Crossett, in section I omitted) and Salo (who, Crossett says, "says things that are so true they hurt—though I mean that as a compliment"). And what of Crossett herself?

> I do not generally get questions about how to become a rock star (in fact, I'm fairly sure I've never gotten one). Since I'm not particularly a rock star, this doesn't bother me, although I will add, for the benefit of anyone hoping to glean such information from this little ditty, that moving to a town of 351 people is not really the best way to go about rockstardom…
>
> In the course of thinking about all these things, though, it has occurred to me that perhaps the way I go about things is a little peculiar. I am the branch manager of a tiny public/school library… There's really very little call for me to know much about open access, or link resolvers, or college-level bibliographic instruction, or any of the other things that I spend time reading about almost every day.
>
> There's no call for me to know all of that as the Meeteetse librarian, it's true, but I feel there's plenty of call for me to know it simply as a librarian. I can't advocate for net neutrality or open access as a member of my profession if I don't know what they are or how they affect it. And, quite frankly, like Dorothea, I can't imagine going through day by day without at least trying to learn something.

I omitted a list of what it is a very-small-library head really *does*. In Crossett's case, if you're a library person and have ever heard of "Meeteetse," there's a pretty good chance it's because of Crossett. She's one of several proofs that being in small and fairly obscure place doesn't prevent you from being known and heard around the nation and around the world. Particularly if you have something to say and are willing to say it.

Rockstardom, notoriety, influence

John Dupuis brings together three related but non-synonymous terms in this April 24, 2008 post at *Confessions of a science librarian* (jupuis.blogspot.com). Indulging in a bit of preliminary egotism here, I'll claim to have influence and, sometimes, a touch of notoriety, even though I'll never be a rockstar. Similarly, I think Crossett and Salo both have influence. Dupuis bases this post partly on Farkas' post (which he labels "how to become an important person") and says, in part:

> In a reputation economy, our personal levels of fame and influence are extremely important. It's what gets us jobs, in the front of the line for plum speaking gigs, interesting/influential committee appointments and the best

> freebies and perqs. It's how you know who the opinion leaders and gatekeepers are. In other words, it opens doors that wouldn't otherwise be open to us…
>
> It seems that a lot of people are thinking about what it means to be an Important Person these days…

Dupuis quotes Farkas and Salo—and goes on to note some problems:

> But clearly, a reputation economy also has potential for inequalities just like any other. What if people who deserve to get fame and influence are denied it just because of their gender? What if you were a physicist and all the men were given the plum assignments when they clearly don't deserve it? It seems that the gatekeepers of a community can use their influence unfairly.

He cites a study related to particle physics (and the people who research it), suggesting strongly that "the awarding of conference presentations was grossly gender biased" relative to actual research productivity—and conference presentations loom large in terms of reputation.

For himself, Dupuis says he's fine with a small core audience and a "modest level of fame" split between the science and library domains, "which I actually think is pretty cool and which suits my interests just fine."

Conclusions?

Not many and not certain. Yes, there are rockstars in our field. We might differ as to our specific lists, but they exist. I'm inclined to believe most of them didn't set out to become rockstars, although I suspect there are exceptions (I've long since apologized for "shameless self-promotion": It's the kind of phrase used by an introvert who's lousy at self-promotion). I've known for a long time that life wasn't fair, and I suspect I've benefitted from that unfairness at times.

I always used to say that, in America (by which I mean the United States), if what you wanted more than anything else in life was to be wealthy, you could probably manage it. That may be less true now than in the past, but there's still some truth to it: If money matters more to you than friends, ethics, morality, legality, health and everything else, there's a good chance you can pull in a big bunch o' bucks. Is it worth it? For most of us, no.

Similarly, if what you want more than anything else is to be famous (at least within a specialized field), you can probably manage that—at least for a while. I'd like to think none of libraryland's rockstars fall into that sad category.

Otherwise, you probably are better off doing the things you care about—and finding the self-confidence to put them out there for inspection, even if your inclination is to keep that light firmly hidden under a basket. Lightning might strike and you might become a rockstar; you might or might not get singed by that lightning. More often, you won't be in wild demand on the speaking circuit, you won't have loads of Dedicated Followers—but there's a good chance you'll make a name for what you do well. And can be proud of doing so. There are worse fates.

Retrospective

Pointing with Pride, Part 2

While *Cites & Insights* should never be confused with journalism or news, sometimes I stumble into relatively fast-moving situations—as in the leading notes for January 2001. Or maybe "misleading notes": That first issue actually covered a four-month period.

January 2001: Number 2

Free, free, free, gone. That's the heart of the second and third items in TRENDS AND QUICK TAKES. First, ZapMe! got zapped—parents and consumer groups hated the "free computers for schools as long as students watch lots of ads" model and the company went under. As an example of extremes, thinking forward to 2008 proclamations that Everything Will Be Free, consider the words of ZapMe's CEO: "There's no more free lunch. That model is dead." Or undead, as the case may be. (Realistically? There have always been and will always be free lunches under certain circumstances, but *everything* can't be ad-supported or otherwise free-at-use.)

Next? More free ISPs going under, this time free dial-up from AltaVista and Spinway. The coverage does serve as a reminder of changing prices and value: Microsoft (via MSN) and Target (via AOL) were stepping in to offer "low cost" service: $20 or $22 a month. *For dialup.* In 2001 dollars.

Web appliances

I devoted two pages to a roundup on "web appliances ad nauseum." Remember web appliances? Sometimes called "thin clients," they were (are) devices with screens, internet access, maybe keyboards, but no real local intelligence or storage. According to a November 2000 *Computer Shopper* article, IDC projected that 42 *million* internet appliances would ship in 2002—and internet appliance sales would surpass PC sales by 2004. Dataquest projected 20 million sales in 2000.

There were lots of them. The iOpener from Netpliance: $399 plus $22 a month for (dial-up) access,

without which the iOpener was a statue. EPods: $199 plus $25 a month. Those were the *neat* ones. CMi had the $699 Icebox, essentially a little TV with DVD player and internet access built in. Compaq and Microsoft were pushing the $199 iPAQ Home Internet Appliance—taking a loss on each one sold. Virgin Megastores *gave away* 10,000 WebPlayers and offered one-year web access free, $50 per year after that. Why? Because Virgin would get commissions on all that online shopping you'd do (the WebPlayers cost Virgin about $400 each). Even Dell had a WebPC—but dropped it rapidly.

Two paragraphs from that roundup seem worth quoting today:

> The case for Net appliances gets more confusing. One analyst loves them because people who won't pay $1,000 for a computer might fall for a recurring monthly charge instead. Another says that appliances are more secure: "You don't have to worry about leaving personal data on the machine, because it can't hold any." Instead, your personal data is stored by some corporation somewhere else—and we know that means it's completely secure, with no possibility of intrusion or damage. Don't we?
>
> I'm bemused by the suggestion that doing *all* your computing attached to remote sites, with all your files stored remotely, is *more* secure than having your own files on your own (not always connected) PC, backed up on your own Zip files or CD-Rs. I must be missing something here, such as the contemporary definition of security.

Stephen Manes had the last word in a cluster of "post-PC" articles, and that word also looks good seven years later:

> "The PC need not die for the competition to flourish. Let a thousand flowers bloom! Bring on a pocketable unit that combines a Web-connected cell phone with an organizer and a detachable wireless keyboard! Bring on digital TV and electronic picture frames and e-books! But don't imagine that they'll kill off the PC anytime soon."

I wrote that feature over a couple of months—and Virgin's WebPlayer was such a sensational idea that it was gone before I managed to finish putting the story together. Virgin sent out $25 gift certificates,since the WebPlayers were completely useless—and the company that made the devices sent out prepaid labels for voluntary return.

Other stuff

This was a "stuff" issue, including some truly silly stuff. One roundup of "our favorite things"—products that *PC World* coveted—said that one $949 15" LCD display was expensive and, a bit later, that a $949 15" LCD display was so reasonably priced that it was the LCD "for the rest of us." The same article touted Franklin's $130+ EbookMan as a great device. With its "generous 240-by-200-pixel screen," how could it fail to woo booklovers?

October 2001: Number 12

I announced "The Crawford Files" in *American Libraries*. The column only lasted through November 2004, but it was a great (if brief) ride. A research firm asserted that micropayments—financial transactions, typically on the web, involving less than $10—would reach $200 **billion** (one thousand million, for international readers) by 2005; I was skeptical both of that projection and the assurance that technical barriers to micropriced content were about to disappear.

> Sure-fire micropayment schemes have been around ever since the Internet opened to commercial transactions—but I don't remember any of these names being involved at the time. The ones that we worked with and read about don't seem to be around any more, possibly because nobody seems to care.
>
> Sooner or later, *some* form of micropayment scheme needs to take hold. That need doesn't assure that any given company will succeed, however—and providing more things to buy surely doesn't assure that more people will buy them. For that matter, one plausible future for micropayments is for Visa and MasterCard to offer lower-overhead, cost-effective payment and processing routines, leaving no room for new entrants.

That hasn't happened. PayPal has emerged as a reasonably good transaction system, but I wonder what percentage of its transactions is for less than $10.

You could buy a wearable computer in 2001: the Xybernaut Mobile Assistant V, a one-pound device using a "Borg-like side-of-the-eye display" (my wording). You strapped the computer to your belt buckle. And it only cost $3,995.

It's worth pointing out where I got things wrong—e.g., "Broadband gets narrower," a segment of TRENDS AND QUICK TAKES noting the shutdown of another broadband ISP and that broadband users weren't using the internet all that much: An average of just over 15 hours a month in July 2001. I didn't question a projection that it would take another seven years for broadband to reach half of all U.S. internet-using households (as opposed to the three years originally projected), and even suggested it might be too optimistic. Well, it *did* take more than three years, but certainly not seven more years from mid-2001.

Was I wrong to say ":CueCat: RIP (and good riddance)"? Not really. Yes, some people are using old :CueCats with LibraryThing—but the company's long-since defunct.

I hadn't started COPYRIGHT CURRENTS yet, but put together article summaries as "A COPYRIGHT CLUSTER." Most of the section was on "DMCA and beyond"—and it's discouraging to note just how little progress there's been. One writer got back from a long weekend and found her internet service disconnected—because the MPAA had (falsely) accused her and her boyfriend of distributing copyright material and the ISP had little choice but to disable the account. And, of course, you *know* what MPAA folks had to say when the writer said she'd need her boyfriend's permission before revealing his IP address: "If my friend were truly innocent, he wouldn't have anything to hide." Some lines are immortal. The Copyright Office released a long report on DMCA's effects; you won't be surprised to find that RIAA and MPAA were happy with the report, while ALA, EFF and others weren't thrilled. One tiny little piece of good news has survived, more or less: the "first chunk…out of DMCA's hide," when a complaint against eBay based on the sale of pirated goods was dismissed on "safe harbor" basis. I suppose it's also good news that SSSCA never made it into law:

> This is a nasty little proposal that would, if passed, make it a civil offense to create or sell "any interactive digital device that does not include and utilize certified security technologies" approved by the U.S. Commerce Department. What's an "interactive digital device"? Any hardware or software capable of "storing, retrieving, processing, performing, transmitting, receiving or copying information in digital form."
>
> If you're looking for sunshine here, there's not much: The act would not be retroactive (they can't come grab the computer that's already on your desk), this is still only a proposed law, and it would take at least a year after passage before the copy-protection requirements would be in place. Otherwise, this is about as bad as it gets.
>
> That's not all. If you distribute copyrighted material that has its security measures disabled or you own a network-attached computer that disables copy protection, you're open to *felony* charges: five years in prison and fines up to $500,000.
>
> If SSSCA passes, the government is in the position of mandating the *circuitry* of most electronic devices. That's bizarre and more than a little scary. Jessica Litman (a law professor at Wayne State) notes that, beyond being bad copyright policy and bad information policy, "it's terrible science policy."

Disney thought SSSCA was "an exceedingly modest and reasonable approach." News Company (Fox) also thought it was a great idea.

To end on an odd note, this issue mentions Sony's Double Density CD-RW CRX200E—a $250 CD burner that could write 1.3GB on special "DD" recordable and rewritable discs. Of course, the discs could only be used with Sony drives and cost considerably more than twice as much as standard CD-R/CD-RW discs. Foolishly, in retrospect, I said "Still, the Sony isn't all that expensive and offers much higher-capacity backup and storage for special purposes." Fortunately, I didn't buy one…

June 2002: Number 22

I'm still proud of the lead paragraphs in the lead essay (BIBS & BLATHER):

> There's not one ALA Annual Conference. Despite the "track" efforts (well-intentioned but, in my humble opinion, more annoying than useful), there surely aren't seven or 27 different ALA conferences. The heading says it: If there are 17,000 library people in Atlanta in June, there will be 17,000 different conferences.
>
> That's a weakness of ALA if you're an organization or control freak. To me, it's one of the association's greatest strengths. For many years, my ALA was just a wrapper around the Library and Information Technology Association's programs and discussions. If you believe in focused education as the heart of a conference, the tracks may help: they can guide you to seven major themes or 27 specific themes. For thousands of vendors, Atlanta is a trade show, the "big show" for the library marketplace.
>
> I find Midwinter a better place to catch up with people and sample new interest groups (LITA) and discussion groups (everybody else). But Annual is the big deal—the only place for programs (other than the ALA President's Program at Midwinter), the biggest range of exhibitors, and the widest range of extracurricular activities.

We still have tracks, and I still find them more annoying than useful. On the other hand, somehow the megaconference has kept growing: While 17,000 was about right for New Orleans in 2006, the numbers for 2005 and 2007 were some 10,000 *higher*—and, by my reckoning, that still means a different conference for each attendee. Which I still regard as a good thing.

Andy Ihnatko, writing at *Macworld*, concluded that "open-source software will probably never have a direct effect on the masses"—and at the same time claimed that Windows XP would turn Microsoft's OS and applications into "subscription services requiring online renewal every now and then." I did mention that Ihnatko wrote for *Macworld*?

FILTERING FOLLIES included lots of commentary on the District Court hearing on CIPA (including the wonderful episode when Geoff Nunberg's expert testimony was held in closed court because N2H2, makers of Bess, asserted he would expose trade secrets—even though *both* sides in the case opposed the motion and he did no such thing). There was also CME-

PA, the Child Modeling Exploitation Prevention Act—and the wording for this proposed new felony is so astonishing it deserves to be repeated:

> Whoever displays, in or affecting interstate or foreign commerce, the image of a child who has not attained the age of 17 years, with the intent to make a financial gain thereby, or offers, in or affecting interstate or foreign commerce, to provide an image of such a child with the intent to make a financial gain thereby, without a purpose of marketing a product or service other than an image of a child model, shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than 10 years, or both.

As I commented at the time:

> Think about posters of the Olsen Twins or Menudo, the 1972 photo of a Vietnamese girl covered by napalm, collections of cute baby pictures, "The Blue Boy," or *any* image of a minor sold *as an image* rather than as promotion for something else. Felonies one and all?

Remember Mark Foley? He might still be a Florida congressperson had it not been for a little incident in 2006 involving suggestive emails and sexually explicit instant messages to teenage boys—or, rather, *exposure* of a series of incidents over a decade. Guess who introduced CMEPA?

March 2003: Number 32

How times change. This 20-page issue had seven sections—and I semi-apologized for its "chunky" nature, as compared with the ten sections in each of the previous two issues. These days, *four* essays in 20 pages might be chunky, or just typical.

Times change for other reasons. The lead essay, "Midwinter Musings," was written shortly after Midwinter 2003 in Philadelphia. Remember Midwinter 2003? Excerpts:

> Cold. So cold. Where am I? Must keep moving. Find open door. What do you mean, use the door on the opposite corner of the block? Can't feel face…
>
> I bundled up for Philly and although it was very cold on Friday, I managed—even walking from the exhibit reception to receptions at the Free Library and Ritz-Carlton. Saturday and Sunday were better. Late Saturday afternoon, it seemed only natural to walk 14 blocks from my hotel to the one great group dinner I joined at Midwinter—and Sunday afternoon was fairly pleasant, with sun, very little wind, and temperatures in the 30s.
>
> Then came Monday. I really wanted to attend the LITA Town Meeting, starting at 7:30 a.m., at the Marriott—a mere four blocks from my hotel, only three of those blocks outside. TV warned us: 10 to 16 degrees, with a wind-chill factor down around zero to four Fahrenheit.
>
> I managed. Barely. But my memories of the Monday meeting (other than the notes I took) and of lunch later with my editor at ALA Editions boil down to the first paragraph of this grumpy little essay. Cold. So cold…
>
> Looking at the long-range conference calendar, I see that Midwinter 2005 is scheduled for Boston, 2008 Philadelphia, and 2010 back in Boston. I've only missed one Midwinter conference in 28 years. My guess is that record won't be nearly as good in a few years. While it was great to see some of the people I only see twice a year, participate in the Top Technology Trends group, see the exhibits, go to one wonderful dinner, and try out a couple of LITA interest groups—well, I'm not sure it was worth it.

My guess was wrong (well, it's not 2010 yet). I did make it to Boston in 2005 and Philadelphia in 2008. Fortunately, the weather in both cases was reasonably pleasant. And, to be sure, I know enough now to *skip* a 7:30 a.m. meeting when it's 10 degrees outside.

Way back in 2003, I was grumping about how difficult it was to get a quick read on LITA Interest Groups—who they are and what they were doing at the conference. And more:

> I feel out of touch with my home division.
>
> The LITA Website provides details of the LITA Board and Executive Committee actions. You can get a list of program names. Sometimes, there are minutes from some committees. That's not enough, and it requires too much digging to see what's new….

You can read the whole grump if you like. I knew that the *LITA Newsletter* had served well as a primary means of communication during the nine years I edited it—and I recognized that it wasn't coming back. I had some foolish and soon-abandoned notion about a stopgap measure.

I *still* didn't know the topics for most LITA IG discussions at Midwinter 2008. Even though the conference program included topics for most discussion groups in other divisions, LITA IGs weren't represented. I was about to say "the LITA Wiki helped…a little," but going to look at it now, I can't honestly say that's true. The LITA Blog helps…*a little*. But posts there only mention seven of the 19 active IGs. Fact is, it's far more difficult than it should be to be aware of what's happening in the division. Will that change? Stay tuned.

Moving on to other topics, I reported in COPYRIGHT CURRENTS that most folks agreed there wouldn't be any new copyright law in 2003, which had the downside that DMCRA wouldn't pass (and still hasn't), but the upside that CBDTPA (the successor to SSSCA), the Broadcast Flag and other extreme-copyright bills were also improbable. Of course there was "DMCA fallout. When, since DMCA passed, hasn't there been "DMCA fallout"?

"Ebooks and etext" quoted an essay at Eastgate Systems. Consider the absolutes (emphasis added):

> **There is no longer room for doubt: the literature** of our immediate future **will be electronic**. Our scientific and technical writing, our journalism, and our stories: **all** will be written and read on screens…
>
> **There is no longer a credible argument against electronic books**, and the arguments in their favor are clear, compelling, and overwhelming… 300-dpi screens with laser-printer resolution are already available… The difference between reading on screen and reading on the page is modest—too modest to make a real difference to the future of serious writing.

Eastgate is a pioneer in hypertext publishing, around since 1982. Looking at its website now, "what's new?" says there's so much new that it's had to move—and the site it's moved to has had nothing posted since May 3, 2005. You can still get to the essay, but the date's unclear. The "HypertextNOW" archive in which it appears has a tagline "remarks on the state of hypertext: 1996-1999," and individual essays have no dates whatsoever. (There's a chronological index, amusing since no dates appear.) Of course, "immediate future" could mean 4000 AD, one writer's target for the death of print.

It felt right to devote several pages to "Thinking about Eldred v Ashcroft"—the Supreme Court decision upholding copyright term extension. Another try at overturning term extension also failed. It's fair to note that the issue will arise again, in a big way, in about nine years…

November 2003: Number 42

I love upbeat stories. Truly I do. This issue began with A SCHOLARLY ACCESS PERSPECTIVE: "Getting That Article: Good News," I was wondering whether open access was *effective* access—that is, would it be easy for ordinary people to find articles in institutional repositories? The preliminary answer: Yes, or at least there were encouraging signs. I'd love to see someone do this informal research on a broader basis using the open web…and I'm guessing the answers would also be encouraging, even given problems with institutional repositories.

There was a lot more about open access (I hadn't started using LIBRARY ACCESS TO SCHOLARSHIP as a running name), including notes on the Sabo bill (which would have substantially improved access to *all* government-funded research; the NIH situation is much narrower and also watered down, but it's better than nothing) and other developments in OA and "alternative publishing" in general.

Now that the high-def DVD "format war" is over, do you recall the earlier format war over DVDs? That was the *writable* war—the appearance of recordable DVDs in two formats, DVD+R/RW and DVD-R/RW. (There's a third one, DVD-RAM, but let's ignore that for now.) As with most format wars, there were big players on both "sides"—but this time the war was (largely) called on account of compatibility. First Sony introduced burners that could handle both + and – formats, but that didn't count: Sony was a prime force behind the + format. This issue noted Pioneer's DVR-A06, another dual-format drive, notable because Pioneer had long been a steadfast supporter of DVD-R. Oddly, I got the import right: This didn't knock out DVD-R, but did marginalize producers of DVD+R drives that *failed* to support DVD-R.

The longest section was, once again, COPYRIGHT CURRENTS, discussing peer-to-peer (with yet another misnamed act, the "Protecting Children from Peer-to-Peer Pornography Act," the summary of which mentions neither children nor pornography but would prohibit distribution of peer-to-peer software except with a whole bunch of hurdles), the RIAA subpoenas (including RIAA's improbable claim that it can distinguish MP3 files that were downloaded over the internet from those locally ripped from CDs)—and a campaign by the Electronic Frontier Foundation that troubled me, much as some other EFF stances trouble me. The campaign? "File-sharing: It's music to our ears." The way I read the campaign (then and now), EFF seemed to be saying massive copyright infringement was something to celebrate—and, sigh, was suggesting the "compulsory license" that some would now like to impose on internet users, whether we download music or not. EFF said "If we all band together and stand up for our rights, we can change the law." As I said then and would say now, "The right to override copyright holders' preferences at will *does not exist* in any legal or moral scheme that comes to mind." (As I also said then, and would say now, "there are times when the copyright situation—particularly as regards movies and music—makes me want to say 'A curse on all your houses!' and ignore the whole thing." Maybe that's one reason I haven't devoted much space recently to copyright?)

July 2004: Number 52

Swimming in dangerous waters, I devoted BIBS & BLATHER to "Top Technology Trends Musings," six years after I started serving on the panel and a year before I gave it up. I was responding to discussions on

LITA-L and elsewhere—e.g., "who certifies the trends?" and "why isn't Trend X on the current list?"—and noted that I'd almost resigned from the group already. I was persuaded to reconsider, but that lasted one year before a grating personal situation made the LITS clause kick in.

I also offered a composite alphabetic list of all the trends (49 of them) identified through Midwinter 2004, based on the committee's summaries. It's an interesting list to review at this remove. That exercise might also be worth redoing four years later.

I was considering print-on-demand way back in 2004, when it was more difficult to do. At the time, I said it might make sense to do paperback versions of *Cites & Insights* at $35 to $40 "if I could project sales of at least 50 to 100 copies for each volume mounted," while "thematic 5x8 volumes, running 160 to 250 pages and costing $25 to $30," consisting of reformatted *C&I* material augmented by other publications, would make sense if I could project 200 copies. How times change! Bound *C&I* volumes cost $29.50 each (and the two volumes are considerably thicker than anything through 2004 would have been), and I could justify doing them even if the only sale was to myself. (So far, I count four sales of one volume, two of the other.) Reformatted material in thematic volumes? Still a possibility, although the volumes would be 6x9, not 5x8—and yes, if I could project 200-copy sales, they'd *definitely* be worth doing.

A six-page section on ebooks, etext and PoD appeared mostly because "it's been half a year since the last roundup"—since there weren't any startling new developments. J. Knight was doing some great essays in the field—and I got around to addressing the special issue of *Journal of Digital Information* on hypertext, where the issue itself was hypertextual. It was also, in my opinion, a mess:

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

Maybe these unaltered sentences from the first and last paragraph of one "node" in the special issue will help you understand why I had trouble—and why it's difficult to satirize hypertextual criticism:

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

The node was by Australian Mez Breeze and carried this title: "Inappropriate Format[]ing][: Craft-Orientation vs. Networked Content[s]." Thanks to blogs, I am now convinced that my difficulties in understanding Breeze have nothing to do with rapid divergence between American and Australian strains of the English language: I understand Australian libloggers just fine, and generally find them a thoughtful, literate, comprehensible bunch.

I did get one thing wrong (probably a lot more than that, but I understand *why* I got this one wrong). I disputed Brewster Kahle's claim that you could produce an on-demand book for "as little as $1.00 each." My comment at the time: "Given laser printing, I'd expect toner and paper costs alone to exceed that figure, except for booklets." Not necessarily. The most obvious approach to really cheap on-demand books, in the U.S. at least, uses a fixed page size of 5.5x8.5 inches (just a little smaller than trade paperback)—thus printing four book pages on each sheet of letter paper. Figure decent copy paper at about $2 a ream (0.4 cents a sheet) and toner costs, for some very low-cost systems, at about 1.5 cents for 5% coverage on an 8.5x11" sheet. So four pages cost about 3.4 cents: Excluding cover and binding costs, that means you could do a 116-page book for a buck. That's not a *big* book, but it's more than a pamphlet.

April 2005: Number 62

"Go away—not now, but soon." Even as we're learning to live within limits, this is good advice—and short enough to repeat in full:

> Have you planned a vacation this year? Great. If not, why not? It's been three years since I admonished readers to "get outta town!" (*Cites & Insights* 2:4). Then, as now, I know too many people treat vacations as disposable extras, niceties when nothing more important is happening. I don't believe that's true. Vacations are vital to healthy, balanced lives. Planning a vacation can be part of the fun, if you do it right.

Make It Real

Real vacations mean vacating—leaving home, leaving work behind, ideally leaving your technology behind as well. Taking a few days to get stuff done around the house (or lie around reading and taking walks) is great, but it's not what a vacation should be.

To me, a true vacation means:

- Being away for at least a week.
- Being somewhere and doing something that discourages thoughts of work.
- "Turning off": ignoring your blog and your aggregator, letting email stack up, setting aside IM. Ideally, you'll leave your notebooks, PDAs, and maybe (gasp) cell phones at home, although that may be too much to ask.

Follow Your Heart

Some people get the greatest pleasure from repetitive vacations—going the same place every year. I believe that's great as *part* of a vacation plan, but there's a lot of merit to travel and discovery. Maybe one week at your regular inn or ranch or amusement park or ski resort, and another week doing something new?

As I noted two years ago:

> I don't believe there's a *Cites & Insights* reader who lives more than two hours from an area worth exploring, whether in the U.S. or elsewhere. Most of us fail to explore our extended back yards; maybe this is a year to be a traveler near home. Is there a "wine country" nearby? (You might be surprised!) State and national parks you never paid attention to? Historic towns—or, for that matter, the big city you've never approached as an outsider?

That's still true. If you live in any of the 50 United States, I *guarantee* there's a commercial winery somewhere in your state—even though some of them don't make wine from grapes, and others bring in grapes from other states (Alaska doesn't grow a whole lot of wine grapes, for example).

I won't suggest what sort of vacation you should take. My wife and I have been exploring the world by cruise ship, as time and money permit, and we love it—even if we now occasionally revisit the same areas because they're so wonderful (for example French Polynesia, Alaska, and soon Costa Rica). But we've also enjoyed driving vacations and, at times, vacations connected to conferences. "Chicagoland" has many interesting areas in addition to the delights of Chicago itself, for example—and San Antonio in winter can be a great place to visit.

I'm delighted to correct one comment from 2002: "Sad to say, one of America's great neotraditional vacation possibilities is almost gone." That was the Delta Queen Steamboat Company and its three authentic steam-driven sternwheelers, cruising America's heartland rivers. The parent company was overextended and went into bankruptcy; as I wrote that essay, only the Delta Queen was still operating.

Fortunately, another company purchased the three Queens and the name itself, re-forming the Delta Queen Steamboat Company as an operating entity. All three boats are running again. We haven't been on them under the new management, but I can vouch for the charm and genuine hokey Americana of the Queens—and how interesting the heartland rivers can be. The one-week cruise from St. Louis to St. Paul (or vice-versa) includes great stops and a fascinating part of the Mississippi, including more than two dozen locks and dams. We loved it. You might even find the new "split week" American Queen vacations interesting: They combine a three or four night New Orleans roundtrip cruise on the American Queen, the grandest and newest of the Delta Queen boats, with three or four nights in New Orleans itself.

Plan a cruise. Plan a train trip (while you still can). Look into places of interest within a few hours of your home. You don't have to break the bank. You do have to break your daily habits and thought patterns. Enjoy the differences you'll find if you look for them (which does mean getting away from McDonald's and finding local color). You don't have to go to Nuku Hiva for a touch of the exotic (although we did love it). Paducah has its exotic side as well.

Get away. It will do you good.

We had an unexpected three-year lapse in cruises and a two-year lapse in vacations—but we're off again in the very near future. Regarding Delta Queen—well, the original is about to leave service (Congress hasn't renewed its Safety of Life at Sea exemption and it has a wooden superstructure), but the American Queen and Mississippi Queen still operate. Fortunately, you *can* still plan a train trip…if you're not on a schedule.

Otherwise? I grumped about website and blog printability, which has gotten better to the extent that people are migrating to WordPress—and worse to the extent that some WordPress templates now put the sidebar material above the actual blog in a printout, which is **Just. Plain. Dumb.** I've pretty much given up any hope of convincing bloggers that their longer posts *should* be printable. Again, LITS. (Life Is Too Short. Did I need to spell it out?)

Ah, "Google and Gorman." A long discussion of Google, bloggers, Michael Gorman and semi-literacy. I was also wrong in that essay (which I heartily recommend at this three-year remove): I quoted Sturgeon's Law as "90% of everything is crap." Turns out he wrote, "90% of everything is crud." I suppose this represents the coarsening of the American mind, or maybe one of those rare cases in which a spade deserved to be called a bloody shovel.

I may have been wrong on that, but I won't apologize for regarding Molly Wood's News.com comment on IE7 as "disturbing and unsupportable." Woods basically said Firefox was doomed because of IE7, including this flat statement: If IE7 has tabs (which it does), Firefox "will be destroyed as surely as the Hungarian uprising of 1956 was crushed by Russia." I, for one, still use Firefox as my primary browser—even though IE7 works just fine.

Midwinter 2006: Number 72

I believe this issue is well worth rereading today, particularly given the current stances of some of the people quoted in the 32-page issue. Quoting highlights or summarizing key points seems hopeless, however. You'll just have to go look at it yourself.

If you haven't already, that is. As of April 24, the PDF version has been downloaded 17,992 times—and it appears that 15,931 people have accessed the single HTML essay. That's just under 34,000 "readers," ignoring pass-along readership and copies mounted on other sites.

You surely know the name of the essay and issue: PERSPECTIVE: LIBRARY 2.0 AND "LIBRARY 2.0"

October 2006: Number 82

The biggest part of this issue is also hard to summarize and, I believe, stands as a contribution to the literature: A two-part OPEN ACCESS PERSPECTIVE on pioneer OA journals. In May 2001, I wrote GETTING PAST THE ARC OF ENTHUSIASM, looking at the track record of the very early open access journals—specifically, the 104 items in ARL's 1995 *Director of Electronic Journals, Newsletters and Academic Discussion Lists* that appeared to be free refereed scholarly electronic journals—what we'd now call "gold OA" journals. (The term "open access" wasn't used much if at all in 1995.)

The first section updated that earlier article with five more years' experience. Briefly, of the 51 OA journals that began no later than 1995 and were still publishing in 2000, most (40) were still publishing when checked in 2006. The second section looked at another 189 entries in *DOAJ* that had first-issue dates of 1995 or earlier—and found quite a few more journals that were legitimately OA as early as 1995 and lasted at least a decade.

Under the heading OLD MEDIA/NEW MEDIA, I looked at "Books, Bookstores and Ebooks." The first paragraph noted some of the contradictions in following the area:

> Print books are doomed. Print books will live forever. Independent bookstores, and all physical bookstores, are doomed, and that's inherently bad for readers. Ebooks barely register as a rounding error, at $12 million worldwide in 2005 out of $80 billion or more in book revenue—less than one-fiftieth of one percent. Ebooks are a small but worthwhile market at $179 million U.S. in 2004—one-half of one percent of the $34 billion U.S. book market.

That same paragraph stands up fairly well today—except that the actual numbers have shifted. I think the most impressive item in the discussion was Book Industry Study Group's estimate that, in 2005, some 63,000 "small presses" generated $14.2 billion in book sales—meaning that AAP's numbers for the size of the book market were much too low, since they include only large publishers. But that was a tiny piece of a seven-page section. The section also included a mild fisking of a nonsensical article that used one highly local situation (the closing of Cody's Telegraph Avenue store in Berkeley) to sound the death knell for all booksellers.

My favorite products in the "peculiar" part of INTERESTING & PECULIAR PRODUCTS were the Iomega ScreenPlay and InPhase Tapestry:

- I loved the $220 ScreenPlay—a "little box with a 60GB hard disk and a little remote control" designed to play video and other stuff on a TV—because it "encourages you to slow down, relax, contemplate a little instead of rushing into your video." How so? It took *PC Magazine*'s reviewer 14 minutes to boot up to a navigational screen on the TV and *at least* five minutes to for any of the navigational icons to get anywhere. The Zen of not yet watching TV: How could that not be worth $220?
- InPhase was touting its holographic storage device, initially planned for 300GB "later this year" (2006) on a 12cm disc—just as it had demonstrated Tapestry in 2002 with a product assured by 2004. That was good enough for *PC Magazine* to say DVD was "at the end of its life." Ah, DVD: Remember back before 2005, when DVDs were still available? So how did the 2006 (or was that 2004?) delivery date work out? Apparently, in 2007 it was still promised for "this year," and a prototype was supposedly demonstrated in April 2008. The new target date for *evaluation* drives is May 2008, which I suppose could be considered very late 2006. The new claim is full production in August 2008. (No, I really don't doubt that some holographic-storage company will release a production product at some point. I *do* doubt it will sweep away other media by

"2012 to 2017," as the June 2002 article proposed.)

Let us not forget old movies. This issue included "Sci-Fi Classics 50 Movie Pack, Part 2." Not one of these "classics" earned a truly great score ($1.75 or $2), but one—*They Came From Beyond Space*—was worth $1.50 and is quite a good flick if you can overlook the plot. Ten more earned decent reviews ($1 or $1.25)—and only one was so poor it came in at less than $0.75. That was *Phantom From Space*, part of W. Lee Wilder's œuvre, and viewed with appropriate levels of suitable mind-numbing drugs, even that one might not cause you to run screaming from the room.

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"Pew Internet & American Life owes me an apology."

True in July 2007, when that was the first paragraph of "Pew Do You Trust?"—an essay on Pew's clear abandonment of observation in favor of advocacy with the choice of "**Lackluster Veteran**" to label 18 million Americans who know their communications and computing technology but don't necessarily *love* it. I call them "balanced users" or "experienced skeptics." True today (and Lee Rainie still uses the label in speeches.) I'm still waiting for that apology…and I'm still lackluster.

The longest essay was ©1: TERM AND EXTENT: "PermaCopyright and Other Extremes." I looked at "true outlying cases" such as Mark Helprin's claim that copyright for "great ideas" should live forever and denunciation of the U.S. Constitution for abridging his rights as a Creator. The essay, an op-ed in the New York *Times*, was ludicrous, giving me a range of other reactions to note—and the chance to criticize some of those reactions. One of the best counters was Jonathan Lethem's "The ecstasy of influence" in the February 2007 *Harper*'s—where Lethem talks about the extent to which nearly all creative work is at least partly derived from previous works in a 34-page essay that is, itself, almost entirely derived from other works. The 34-page essay is followed by 14 pages of attributions. (I referenced the "Peter Schickele works on P.D.Q. Bach albums"—wonderfully original and hilarious works composed, or remixed, entirely of quotations from other compositions.) I included "an immodest proposal," suggesting that there *should* be infinite copyright for certain truly original works—with a reduction in the length of copyright for everything else to, say, 28 years. All you'd need to do for PermaCopyright is to create a *wholly* original work and, of course, pay a reasonable annual fee to maintain PermaCopyright, just as homeowners pay property taxes. "After all, why should intellectual property be treated *more* advantageously than real property?" There's a lot more. I'll recommend this essay for rereading, even if it is less than a year old.

In MAKING IT WORK, I quoted other people about balance—the need to back off, in some cases, in order to maintain sanity. It's an issue that hasn't gone away and isn't likely to, as is the next segment, on balancing the old and the new.

Most of the LIBRARY ACCESS TO SCHOLARSHIP segment was about money, always a hot topic. Maybe I should close this RETROSPECTIVE by noting one of several iPod accessories discussed in INTERESTING & PECULIAR PRODUCTS, with the note that I really do think this one is "interesting" rather than "peculiar," if you have the budget and the right room for it:

> The May 2007 *Sound & Vision* reviews a device that puts your iPod in classic company: Rock-Ola's iPod Bubbler. It's just what the first and last words might suggest: A classic jukebox with eight lighted bubble tubes and four rotating color cylinders. As with most modern replica jukeboxes, it holds 100 CDs (still giving you that great record-changing action). But it also has an iPod dock and remote. I won't argue with the price for a device like this (which has five speakers): $6,000.

I think I'd rather pay $6,000 for a classic (replica) Rock-Ola jukebox with 100-CD changer and iPod dock than $3,000 for a Ferrari-licensed table radio (and CD/DVD player), although neither is likely to happen any time soon.

That's it for the Terrible Twos. Up next time, the Threes.

Masthead

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