Cites & Insights

Crawford at Large

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Volume 8, Number 7: July 2008 ISSN 1534-0937 Walt Crawford

Bibs & Blather

Updating Top Tech Trends

Think of this as an odd and sad followup to two other items—both of them in last issues RETROSPECTIVE:

- I commented on a March 2003 complaint that, as a LITA member, I was finding it surprisingly difficult to find out not only what *did* happen in LITA programs and discussion groups during ALA conferences, but specifically what *would* be discussed during Midwinter and Annual interest group meetings.
- From the July 2004 issue, I noted "Top Technology Trends Musings" and the composite alphabetic list of "trends" I included—running through Midwinter 2004. "That exercise might also be worth redoing four years later."

That comment stayed with me, and I included "TTT: Revisit" on a casual list of short-term article topics. And decided to put it together in time for this issue. After all, that would be just short of ten full years (Midwinter 1999 through Midwinter 2008—you'd need Annual 2008 for a full ten years).

Guess what? Things have gotten worse since 2003. The LITA Top Tech Trends Committee no longer updates the list of top tech trends—hasn't since Midwinter 2005. For Midwinter 2006, 2007 and 2008, and for Annual 2005, 2006 and 2007, I have *no idea* what topics were raised as the Top Tech Trends.

This is sad. TTT was one of the few bright spots in keeping the rest of LITA informed.

When Did Creative Work Become Worthless?

Yes, the heading is an overstatement–but the situation described below struck me as peculiar enough to deserve a little hyperbole. It relates to *Balanced Libraries: Thoughts on Continuity and Change* and three posts (and related comments) on two liblogs. The posts and comments all happened in late May, while I was incommunicado (on vacation and only checking work-related email once every couple of days at fairly high shipboard internet prices).

Before getting to the posts and comments, I want to be clear about one thing: This is *not* about rejecting negative criticism.

To drive that point home, I was doing some ego-Googling (which I rarely do, although not for lack of ego) and encountered a terse review of *Balanced Libraries* that I hadn't seen earlier. The review appeared on Goodreads and was written by Jack (I think you have to join Goodreads to find out who Jack is). Here's the review, in full:

> Generally just classic Crawford: long-winded, rambling, reactionary rhetoric.

My comment? That's an honest opinion stated clearly and presumably after reading the book. I have no problem with it. (There's only one word I might disagree with…)

Inside This Issue

But this other combination is something else—not a negative review of the book (which I'd link to or quote) but, well, something else.

It begins with "Where are blogs bred? In the heart or in the head?" posted by Keith Kisser on May 27, 2008 at *The Invisible Library* (sanchezkisser.com/blog/). Kisser recently published a science fiction/fantasy novel, *The Machine of the World*, on Lulu, and was searching Amazon to see whether it showed up yet. It hadn't (and still hasn't, which is odd). Instead, he found the CreateSpace edition of *Balanced Libraries*, where I quoted from one of his blog posts. (The post favored Netflix-style library service and included a

charming statement ending in "time to wait for the dinosaurs to die off." You'll find it in Kisser's archive on December 8, 2006.)

Kisser doesn't comment on the book itself or the context for the quotation, since he hadn't read it. But he does have opinions about having a blog post show up in a book. Some of what he says:

> But one thing I am, is uncertain about how I feel about being cited in this or any other book. At first go, it's a little flattering to have my opinions taken into consideration, even if, as I gather from the few pages I've read online…Walt Crawford is criticizing me. That's fine. Healthy debate is great and I'm a big boy and can handle it. But what remains uncertain at this point (because again, I haven't read the whole book yet) is the context…
>
> The thing is, my blog is a rough draft of ideas that are constantly changing and evolving. Some library blogs are more academic (i.e. judiciously worded) and take topics at a more in-depth, analytical perspective. I do that sometimes but I'm not above tossing off a half baked idea, contradicting myself later, or criticizing reactionary librarians or critics of libraries with impertinent language. It's my blog and I'll rant if I want to. And anyone is free to read, link or cite my words as they see fit. It's a wide and woolly Internet and I neither hide my identity nor suffer the delusion that a blog is somehow a private forum. If you can read it on the Internet, it isn't private or secret.
>
> But just how public and in what capacity a blog, any blog is, has yet to be defined…. [Notes that his blog ranges widely...] You see the problem here? In which context was my post cited? Is it Academic Librarian Keith being cited or Geek Keith? Maybe it's Slightly Sleepy and a Little Cranky with a Side of Silly Keith?…
>
> Blogs are still too new to have a defined space in the academic world…. How do you treat blogs? As Journals or diaries? Thy can be both and at the same time. It's nutty. And confusing, And wonderful. But mostly confusing.

I'd challenge some of the last two paragraphs:

- I think we're **long** past the point where "how public…a blog is" has yet to be defined. An open blog–one anybody can reach (as opposed to some LiveJournal blogs and other protected blog) is a series of publications. It's public. It's a publication. It's quotable. Each post is a publication. People have been quoting from blog posts in articles and books almost since there have been blogs. For that matter, it's fair to assume that a lot more people will read Kisser's post as quoted here or at *Walt at random* than will read it as quoted in *Balanced Libraries*, since it's wildly unlikely that I'll ever sell 1,500 to 2,500 copies of the book (roughly the average daily readership on the blog and typical first-two-months readership for C&I).
- I provided date and address for the post, as I did for all quoted posts. That allows any reader to find the context–-typically a lot more easily than they could find the context for a quotation from print, where the reader might or might not have access to the original. I quoted Keith Kisser talking about library services. It's not my job to guess "which Keith Kisser" was writing the post. I'm prone to changing opinions and issuing rough drafts here as well—and I know that, once posted, they're published statements suitable for citation.
- "Academic world" is a red herring, since *Balanced Libraries* isn't an academic work and I'm not an academic.

I was surprised that, in 2008, someone would question the appropriateness of quoting from a blog post in more formal literature. That train left the station a *long* time ago and I don't think there ever was a question. People have been quoting elist posts in formal literature for many, many years, and that's never been much of an issue either, as long as the elists are public.

The first commenter, Jenny, thought it was great Kisser was cited in a book. In part:

> Does it really matter in what context you were cited? Someone took an idea you blogged about because it sparked an idea they had and ran with it. Isn't that part of the point of a blog? To create wider discourse? And, even if Crawford did use your blog entry out of context at least you'll always have something to rant about at dinner parties.

To which Kisser responded:

> True. Though I'm less concerned about how he quoted me in particular and more interested in the idea of blogs being quoted in a scholarly paper as a general concept. I've also found out more about the circumstances of this citation in particular. I'll have an update soon.

Somehow *Balanced Libraries* has now shifted from being a book to being academic to being "a scholarly paper." In any case, blog posts have showed up in formal refereed articles for years as well, so that general concept is also settled. Blog posts in non-pseudonymous blogs are signed publications.

I would have posted some of this as a comment—but, although comments do appear, Kisser later closed the post to comments, so that wasn't possible. I might have left it at that, particularly since I really don't think there's any serious controversy about the public, citable, quotable status of public blog posts. (What part of "public" don't you understand?)

But wait…there's more!

On May 28, 2008, Kisser posted "Not-So-Balanced Libraries." He begins noting that he'd wondered aloud

"about the context of such citations and the weird gray area inhabited by blogs in the academic world." (My book isn't academic and the area isn't all that gray…but never mind.) He "did a little more research" leading to my website and a link to the book at Lulu.com. The Amazon record he originally found isn't for the Lulu edition, it's for the CreateSpace edition–but, again, never mind. And here's where it gets interesting. Since this is all about me and I'm commenting on it, I believe fair use applies, so I'm quoting the rest of the post in full:

> This in no way invalidates his book, or thesis, but neither does it really inspire much confidence. Let's be honest–and this is coming from a fellow Lulu author–self published academic work tends to have a certain… charm, shall we say. It's good to know others are getting their work out there independently and for all I know, Walt Crawford is the unsung, Tom Paine of the library world. But seriously, Walt, $29.50 for a paperback is bad enough but $20 for the download? Downloads are free. I could understand maybe asking for donations. Charging a buck or two is acceptable, if you want to be a dick. But $20 for a PDF is madness. Like, RIAA suing tween music downloaders for their parent's retirement fund level of madness. Cory Doctorow explains why. Bad form, Walt.
>
> The only thing worse than not making an ebook available (especially when self publishing the book on Lulu, where that option is free and as easy as clicking a single button) is charging such a ridiculous price for it. This is one of those really easy web 2.0 ideas that often get ignored by library administrators because they either can't or won't change their minds about access and distribution models. If charging people for ebooks is part of your idea of creating a balanced library, I'm not impressed. And neither am I willing to spend $30 bucks for some out-to-lunch academic's pet project.

Well now. First he says publishing through Lulu doesn't inspire much confidence—and I agree. If I didn't already have a reputation (for good or for bad) through 12 traditionally-published books and a few hundred traditionally-published articles and columns, and through *Cites & Insights*, I would never have attempted Lulu for a nonfiction book. "Walt Crawford" is the real brand here, for better or worse.

I'm hardly the "unsung Tom Paine of the library world." Kisser's never heard of me. No reason he should have: I'm not all that noteworthy. But a few thousand others have—well, tens of thousands in the case of the Library 2.0 special.

"$29.50 for a paperback is bad enough but $20 for the download? Downloads are free." Sez who? Cory Doctorow? I haven't adopted Doctorow as a guru. The $29.50 price is, to put it bluntly, cheap for a 247-page trade paperback on current technological issues in the library field. Every similar work I'm aware of costs at least $35, with one going for more than $100. But that's not really the issue. The issue is whether an author is obliged to give away his or her work for free, as long as it's in downloadable form.

Kisser seems to think that they are—"Downloads are free." He even says that charging a buck or two is only acceptable "if you want to be a dick" and seems to equate my $20 price with RIAA's infringement suits.

In the final paragraph, Kisser once again calls me an academic—this time an "out-to-lunch academic." Somehow my belief that authors can request compensation for their work (done on their own time) is "part of [my] idea of creating a balanced library." I'll cop to that: I don't believe balanced libraries should set out to make authorship worthless, even though they can, do, and should provide free (prepaid via taxes or tuition) access to written materials. (I assume the few dozen libraries that purchased *Balanced Libraries* circulate it, and would certainly hope so!)

This is, to put it mildly, bullshit. Writing a book is hard work. To assert that an author is at best clueless and at worst "a dick" because the author doesn't give that work away is insulting and offensive…and devalues creative effort. If an author wants to follow Doctorow's approach, more power to them. That doesn't make it the only correct or honorable approach. In fact, the whole "give it away so your true fans will buy other stuff" meme works badly for writers and even worse for niche writers.

I would have protested directly—but again, although there are comments, comments are closed. So I might have commented in an essay on copyright balance about the dystopian notion that you're obliged to give it away if it can be distributed digitally.

Except for the linked post and comments…

There's one comment and a trackback, and the comment is from the person who wrote the blog post that's tracked back: Aaron at *SemiConscious dot org*. (www.semiconscious.org). His May 29, 2008 post is entitled "Library 1.87" and is brief enough to quote in full:

> What's daffier than daffy?
>
> Writing a book about the future of libraries (you know, those places where they lend books to people)… and then charging twenty dollars to download it.
>
> Who out there has the pun, the barb, the eloquent poison-pen quip, to sum up the silliness of this situation in devastating fashion? Let's hear 'em. Seriously, I'm tapped out. I got nothin'…

I'll admit that, until then, I was unaware that all other books about libraries were free in ebook form—that,

somehow, writing about a place that lends books requires you not to charge for your book. There's a logical chain there, but I'm too dim to see it.

"Keith" noted that you could get an estimate of what the book costs to manufacture. Actually, you can get a precise figure. Keith mistakenly assumes that I'm dealing with retail markup because there's an ISBN (there's no ISBN on the Lulu edition) and says I'm "charging twice as much as the printed edition for a download" which he calls "a clear cut case of shenanigans." In reality (I got this wrong in my comment—Aaron's blog does have comments open), my net proceeds come to $15.94 for the paperback version via Lulu (less via Amazon) and $16 for the download—a six cent difference, hardly "twice as much." Am I overcharging for the paperback? I'm charging less than the going rate for such books… As for "shenanigans," since the prices are clearly stated, the costs are readily available, and nobody's forcing anyone to buy the book, I can't imagine what Keith has in mind.

Then there's this capper, from "StaciB":

> Clearly, he's writing for an incredibly gullible audience. Which tells me how little he knows about libraries and librarians in the first place. And just as clearly, he's more interested in making money than in making sense. How about "Techno-twerp exploits self-defeating prophesy."

See how we've progressed? Now it's appropriate to attack me as "writing for an incredibly gullible audience" and I can't know much about libraries or librarians–all because I'm asking to be paid for my work by those who wish to read it.

This is character assassination and I think it's wildly inappropriate. StaciB doesn't know who I am (nor should she). None of them seem to be aware that I give away the equivalent of four typical books a year (in *Cites & Insights*) or that I have established that I know a little bit about libraries and librarians. Anyone who understands library publishing at all knows that, if I was "more interested in making money than in making sense," the last thing I'd be doing is writing self-published books on librarianship—or even traditionally-published books! Speaking, column writing, consulting, greeting folks at Wal-Mart: All better paid gigs than the Lulu books are likely to be.

I did write a response to this post and the comments—and, again, I'll quote it in full (it's my work!), noting that my "$13″ estimate was wrong…

> I have a simple response for this post and the two comments: Nobody is requiring you or anyone else to buy either the download or the print book.
>
> If you're offended by a writer who actually hopes to have some small compensation for the effort involved in writing a book, so be it. I disagree. Nobody paid me to do this, done entirely on my own time. There's no way I'm going to earn Big Bucks on a PoD book in librarianship. With a LOT of luck I might earn minimum wage for the time spent on the book…
>
> Keith: No shenanigans. The Lulu edition doesn't have an ISBN, only the Amazon/CreateSpace version. In fact, you can determine EXACTLY how much I'm receiving for the downloaded or print versions from Lulu itself (it's about $13 for the print version, $16 for the download—I'd prefer that people buy the print version, but offered the download because people asked for it).
>
> StaciB: I could refer you to those "incredibly gullible" librarians (such as John Dupuis and Pete Smith). For that matter, I could refer you to my dozen traditionally-published books in the library field (beginning with *MARC for Library Use*) to demonstrate how little I know about libraries and librarians. But, since it's clear that I'm more interested in making money than in making sense (presumably why I've been giving away Cites & Insights for seven years now), I'll just bow to your superior wisdom. It must be nice to be able to make such crack judgments about my knowledge and abilities with such utter clarity.

That's where it stands. Apparently, some folks believe it is wrong for an author to ask for compensation for his writing. I disagree. I think it's perfectly appropriate to give it away if that suits your needs. I think that, for a few people, giving away the downloadable version will sell the print version–and that's great. (I gave away three chapters of *Balanced Libraries* via *Cites & Insights*.) I'm fairly sure that, if the attitudes expressed here become universal, a whole lot of specialized writing just won't get done, unless it's by people who are otherwise sponsored.

Trends & Quick Takes

The HD Saga Continues

It seems unlikely that there will be enough (or interesting enough) activity regarding high-definition optical discs to warrant full essays in the future—but the fallout of Toshiba's decision to stop producing HD DVD players continues.

I was surprised by the editorial slant of *Home Theater*'s April 2008 news-section coverage, which I can only describe as "bitter to the end." Technically, this was written before Toshiba dropped the last shoe, but that doesn't excuse coverage this slanted:

> If this is truly the end, HD DVDs demise would be a tragedy for Toshiba, which would have benefited from a future torrent of licensing revenue, and for consumers, for whom the format is an excellent deal.

The writer (Mark Fleischmann) goes on to dismiss Blu-ray's 66% greater disc capacity as "marginal" because HD DVD discs do a good job. He makes a big point that "there are more than a million HD DVD players in the field" (which doesn't necessarily mean "sold"), but doesn't note that there are more than *ten* million Blu-ray players, mostly in the form of PlayStation 3 consoles.

In the final paragraph, Fleischmann suggests that downloads could mean Blu-ray won't do all that well either—which seems like sour grapes and undermines the "future torrent of licensing revenue" in the quoted material. As for the "excellent deal," one has to wonder how long Toshiba could keep subsidizing player sales. The answer is, apparently, not long enough.

A followup in the May 2008 issue is also full of editorializing, referring to Blu-ray's victory with the phrase "the fox is already in the henhouse" and, once again, stressing the million HD DVD players and completely ignoring the much-larger Blu-ray base. This time, Fleischmann also stressed the cost-effectiveness of HD DVD disc-making and the "expensive new manufacturing process" required for Blu-ray—which never resulted in HD DVD discs being cheaper than Blu-ray discs. This time Fleischman notes that the "marginal" difference in disc capacity is 66% (25 gigabytes per layer for Blu-ray, 15 for HD DVD).

Yardena Arar, the "Skeptical Shopper" at *PC World*, offers a refreshingly honest column in the April 2008 issue, reviewing services for downloading or streaming movies: "For true high-def movies, you need discs." That says it all; the rest is details. You can get "lower-def high-def movies" from Comcast On Demand and, in the future, from others—but Arar's looked at the results ("decent") as compared to Blu-ray output: From the latter, "the films just plain look better." As Arar points out, Netflix doesn't charge "a dime extra" to send Blu-ray versions. Given the realities of bandwidth, she doesn't see any quick change.

One Odd View of the Top Five Tech Trends

The April 2008 *Sound & Vision* devotes a fairly long article to "The top 5 tech trends for '08," calling these the technologies "that we guarantee…um think maybe will emerge as being significant over the next few years." Oddly enough, given that Ken Pohlmann is the writer, all five trends have to do with TV.

Remembering "the next few years" and that these are trends for 2008, not for "from here to infinity," here's the list:

- **OLED TVs.** Well, yes, there is one, from Sony—a magnificent picture by all accounts, "green," and only $2,500—but it's also only 11" diagonal. Since the article says OLED isn't "ready to be a contender in the big leagues" and that the short life of blue OLEDs hasn't been solved, the article even concludes that this won't show up in family-size TVs "for another few years." So how does it belong here? (I say that with regret: I'd *love* to have a big-screen OLED TV with its energy efficiency and expanded color spectrum, if the OLED would last at least 10,000 hours.)
- **Wireless video**. The primary case here seems to be that you have *lots* of TVs in the house communicating with one or more players—but there's nothing in the writeup to suggest that single standards have been adopted or that we'll see it that rapidly.
- **4K Video**. That's right. Never mind that most people still don't have proper 2K video (that is, full 1080p HDTV), at least not for most viewing. "4K is the real deal." Forget what they said four years ago about HDTV being like looking through a window—nope, now that's just tattered old stuff, and the difference is "impressive enough to encourage upgrades." Oh, you'll need a 300GB storage device for a single 4K movie. My own take on this being significant for consumers "in the next few years"? Not a chance.
- **Dolby HDR**. Which stands for High Dynamic Range—using special techniques to increase the contrast range of HDTVs. This one's already on the market, to some extent, in new LED-based LCD TVs that can dim the LEDs in portions of the screen. How many people are going to replace their HDTVs over the next few years to get better contrast? Your guess is as good as mine. Since there are no limits on consumer spending in this, the eternal boom, I wouldn't venture to be skeptical.
- **3D TV**: Right. There are, oddly enough, some HDTVs that can generate 3D images—if you add on the "sync transmitter" and those dorky glasses. The prognosis even says "The Next Big Thing? No."

Well, this article *is* in an April issue…but it's an awfully big chunk of the editorial content for the issue.

The Next 25 Years

PC World devotes several March 2008 articles to "25 this-or-that" to celebrate the magazine's 25th anniversary. By now, you've probably heard most of these sure-fire projections, most of them far enough in the future that we'll have safely forgotten if they don't pan out.

No question marks here. Dan Tynan states flatly:

> Technology will become firmly embedded in advanced devices that deliver information and entertainment to our homes and our hip pockets, in sensors that monitor our environment from within the walls and floors of our homes, and in chips that deliver medicine and augment reality inside our bodies.

You *will* have ubiquitous computing and be chipped in the future: It's inevitable. If you read the full report and think about energy and resource limitations, you have to wonder—both how it is that we're going to rebuild entire communities, from the ground up, in the next quarter-century, and also where the unlimited resources will come from. You might even think there's a *big* leap from cochlear implants for hearing to implants that "let you receive data directly from the Net" or allow brain-to-brain communication—but that's because you're not with it.

Ten Most Annoying Online Ads

Not ten ads, but ten *types* of ads as enumerated in the March 2008 *PC World*. It's a sprightly page-plus column by Tom Spring. Here are the types, with almost none of Spring's fine commentary:

- Old-school attention-grabbing ads. You know, the blinking, dancing things that try to distract you from the actual page?
- Noisy ads. *Any* site that starts audio without my explicit request gets shut down pretty fast—and ads are worse.
- Floating ads. Worse than the blinkers—the ones that take over the screen until you wait them out or manage to shut them down.
- "Triple threat"—the floating video sales pitch, with audio *and* takeover.
- Mouse-over land-mines. Turns out there's a company, Vibrant Media, that provides technology so a site can display *eight* keyword popups linked to text—and these ones are hard to close too.
- Viral ads, ones that you're supposed to love enough to send to others.
- Expanding ads. I just love these (and, yes, *PC World* runs them): Accidentally mouse into a regular rectangle and it expands to take over most or all of the browser window.
- Personal/tailored ads: They're getting more personal—and more annoying.
- Malware-laced ads: Apparently common on MySpace, these are ads that *don't* require explicit action to install Trojan horses or backdoor programs.
- Bait, switch and infect ads: Ones leading to booby-trapped websites.

And to think I used to be offended by "advertorials," particularly when they mimic the typeface and layout of the publication in general. I still am, but they're innocuous by comparison.

Quicker Takes

Arno H.P. Reuser has an intriguing article, "When InterNET is InterNOT," in the January/February 2008 *ONLINE Magazine*—but I'm not quite sure what to make of it. Reuser is a librarian with the Ministry of Defense in the Netherlands. His six "The Internet is NOT" points: international, easy, just Google, large, objective, anonymous. To some extent, it's an elaborate extension of "Not everything is on the free web," a point that most every *ONLINE* reader certainly understands. (There's a lot more to the internet than the free web, to be sure, but you'd lose the cute article title.)

As to the individual assertions? Saying "the internet is not international" is both true and nonsensical. First, it confuses connectivity with resources (saying that Sierra Leone has few connections to the internet does *not* imply that the internet won't have much in the way of resources from or about Sierra Leone); second, "international" and "ubiquitous" are two very different things. "Not easy" really means "you can get more out of it with expert techniques." "Not just Google" is certainly true and important. "Not large" as compared to commercial vendors—well, that's a tough issue (not helped by Reuser's dismissal of "useless weblogs"), and it's odd that Reuser nowhere mentions the *significant* fact that Google and other open web search engines (a) return somewhat meaningless result sizes, (b) *won't let you see* the full set of results if it's greater than 1,000. "Not objective"—the summary basically says that the web is like the rest of mankind's achievements, "a mirror of the cultures, political systems, and human beings that compose it and use it." The web comes from people; it is not Godlike. "Not anonymous"—largely true.

What the article is really saying is that librarians can outperform laypeople when retrieving information. Probably true. (I have mixed feelings about one anti-Google anecdote: Reuser asks students in a searching class about today's weather and is bothered that half of them "actually start searching with Google to find some weather sites, instead of just looking out the window." Well…if I look out the window, I can see that the part of the sky I'm looking at is clear blue. If I put "94040 weather" in the search box on Firefox (assuming I have the box set to Google or Live Search, not IMDB or Worldcat.org), I can see that Mountain

View in general is clear and 68 degrees, with an expected high of 72 degrees, and there's a several-day forecast as well. If I'm already at my computer and connected, the web search is a rational act that yields *more* information than looking out the window.)

- "Talk is cheap, but Word is expensive." That's how a *PC World* pitch for Jarte (a miniature word processor) begins—and, frankly, I'm getting tired of this routine. I don't know about Jarte (it's "free"—but if you want spellcheck and outlines, it's $19, and the mini-review gives no sense of how much of Word's power is missing), but I do know something about how expensive Word is. And, particularly given the power and (to my mind) improved ease of use of Word 2007, the answer is "not very"—particularly not as compared to, say $19. For a home with two computers, it's $60-$75 per person—oh, and that includes Excel and PowerPoint. Three computers? $40-$50. Office Home & Student 2007 for three users costs $120 to $150. Even if you never use PowerPoint, most home users will use spreadsheets often enough that I'd call it reasonable to assert that Word costs around $30. If you prefer open source, great. Hmm. A little investigation suggests that Jarte probably has fairly robust editing capabilities—because it's essentially a Wordpad overlay. Well, that's one way to reduce Microsoft's domination: Use their products. (A two-thirds-page article later in that same issue suggests that you "Forget Word!"—and advocates WordPad itself—especially if you don't need such "advanced features" as smart quotation marks and tables. And word count. And global replacement showing counts. And…)
- Poor Lance Ulanoff. Bad enough he called for a clear victory for HD DVD. Now, in the February 2008 *PC Magazine*, among other predictions ("2008 will be the year Apple falls back to earth" and "Facebook will fade in 2008), he's got The Prognosis for the high-def war. It's going to stall, dual-format players will proliferate, and in 2009 the teams will merge—leading to a single high-def format in 2010. Here's my counter-prognosis: Dual-format players will fade away pretty rapidly. Yes, we'll stop caring, because there will be a single high-def format in 2008. Ulanoff finally admitted he was wrong, a couple of months later.
- On the other hand, while Ulanoff thinks people will get along fine with Vista by the end of the year, Jim Louderback—in the same issue—says it will "remain a bloated, unstable, unappealing, and slow system." Huh? He also thinks we'll *all* be involved with *lots* of social networks this year—oh, and that users will abandon Apple. Maybe both of these belong later in this issue…say right around the back pages

Perspective

One, Two, Some, Many: Search Results & Meaning

When is a number not meaningful—even though it may be correct?

Many times. That's a whole series of commentaries, some of which I've written in the past. How bad is the numeracy problem? Bad enough and, I believe, getting worse. Far too many survey-based statistics use more precision than can be justified; far too many comparisons use percentages in ways that are true but misleading.

This essay isn't about the general problem. It's about reported search result counts and their meaning. More specifically, it's about reported result counts from open web search engines (Google, Yahoo!, Live Search and others) and the uses of such result counts.

The Full Title and the Problem

Here's the full title for this perspective:

> **One, two, three, ten, some; one hundred, nine hundred, one thousand, many: The useful numbers for web search results.**

That's partly a reference to languages that lack extended counting systems, because those languages sometimes get it right. For many purposes, "one, two, three…ten…lots" is in line with what we perceive. At higher magnitudes that's fairly clear. Can you visualize the difference between ten and 100? Probably. The difference between 100 and 1,000? Less clearly, I suspect: If I ask you how many houses are in your neighborhood, can you say confidently whether it's closer to 100 or 1,000?

How about the difference between 1,000 and 10,000? Or 10,000 and 100,000? Or 100,000 and one million? Do you have *any* way to visualize those differences in real-world terms? Really? Orders of magnitude are hard once you get past "some."

I digress. My focus is on open web search engine result counts—because such counts are so often used as though they were meaningful and as though *comparisons* among counts had meaning.

That's the problem. Search engine result counts are stated as though they had absolute and comparative meaning, even when they frequently don't—or at least don't in any verifiable way.

Laziness and history

The problem arises because of laziness, but also because LexisNexis result size counts were frequently used as indicators of current popularity. You know the drill: If "Britney Crenshaw" shows 1,500 hits for the last six months in LexisNexis and "Florence Casaba" shows 2,500 hits for the same period, Florence is a lot more popular in the media than Britney.

That was also lazy journalism, but based on a truth of sorts. There almost certainly *were* 1,500 items mentioning Britney Crenshaw and 2,500 items mentioning Florence Casaba during the six-month period—even if the items might be repetitive. A dedicated reporter could look at all 1,500 and 2,500 items. You could reasonably assert the following for the universe as covered in LexisNexis:

- For the period in question, Florence Casaba was mentioned in 66% more articles than Britney Crenshaw.
- For the period in question, Florence Casaba was mentioned in 2,500 articles.
- For the period in question, Britney Crenshaw was mentioned in 1,500 articles.
- Florence Casaba was a higher-profile personality during that period than Britney Crenshaw.

The reality of web search results

As it happens, both those searches yield Google results—"about 116,000" for Britney Crenshaw and "about 3,880" for Florence Casaba. (I made up the two names, but you know how it is…) Which of these statements is likely to be true for the universe of Google-indexed web pages?

- Britney Crenshaw is mentioned in 30 times as many web pages as Florence Casaba.
- Britney Crenshaw is mentioned in roughly 116,000 web pages.
- Florence Casaba is mentioned in roughly 3,880 web pages.
- Britney Crenshaw has a much higher profile than Florence Casaba.

My answer? *At most* one of those four statements is likely to be true—and none is verifiable. The fourth statement may be true, or it may not. The first three? The nature of web search engine result counts and the character of web search engine results combine to make it impossible to verify those statements, although it is sometimes possible to suggest that they're false.

Let's go through this example in more depth before moving on to "real" examples.

Parsing Britney Crenshaw

First admission: I used word searches, as do most politicians and demagogues trying to make claims based on web searches (e.g., "there are forty-six million free porn web sites" based on searching the words "free" and "porn" in Google). I didn't surround the names with quotes.

Never mind. That's what most people do, isn't it?

Let's look at those 116,000 web sites. I have Google set to show 100 results per page. I'll click on the "10" at the bottom, to get to the end of the first 1,000 results.

Whoops. It isn't showing results 901-1,000; it's showing results 501-591 of "about 125,000." Suddenly there are 9,000 more results—but I can only see 591 of them. Why is that?

You know Google's first explanation:

> In order to show you the most relevant results, we have omitted some entries very similar to the 591 already displayed.
>
> If you like, you can repeat the search with the omitted results included.

Sounds good to me. Let's do that.

Click on "10" at the bottom. I get "Results 601-604 of about 115,000." In other words, by including the "omitted results" I can *see* 13 more items—but Google seems to think the total number has gone down. And, oddly, the "omitted some entries" footer still appears—but clicking the link again produces the same 604 (of 115,000) results.

What of the other 114,400 or so? Do they exist? You can't prove it by me (filtering was off). Why does Google claim such a high number? Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe there's an index node for the join of Britney and Crenshaw that yields 115,000 hits, which could include many occurrences in the same documents. Maybe something else is happening. Maybe the number has no relation to reality.

There is a clear, verifiable, clean result for the *phrase* "Britney Crenshaw"—because it's an obscure name. It yields eight results at first, 13 with "very similar" results included—and you can see all 13 results. (Or not: Checking a few, there were parked pages, 404s, duplicates, redirects…but that's the reality of the web. Two identical pages were attempts to find this person, most of the rest appeared to be video pages where "Britney" and "Crenshaw" only incidentally appear together in a set of tags.)

So: There may be anywhere from zero to 13 Google-indexed web pages that mention Britney Crenshaw…a slight reduction from 115,000.

Note this: If there *were* more than 1,000 distinct Google-indexed web pages mentioning, say, a different Britney, *you wouldn't be able to verify how many there are*. Google won't show you more than 1,000

results. Period. End of discussion. You can try to get more by refining the results in various ways, but that only goes so far. (Incidentally, unless you include very similar pages, that other Britney only shows 733 pages out of, oh, about 115 **million**.)

Parsing Florence Casaba

Remember poor Florence? She had a mere 3,880 results, one-thirtieth as many as Britney. Ah, but I had to break the writing process for this article over several days—and on the next day, most of the results magically vanished, leaving a mere 928.

Or did they? Here's another interesting aspect of web search engines, especially Google:

- Repeating a search doesn't necessarily yield the same results even within the same hour.

The first time, I used the FireFox search box (with Google as the selected engine) to search for Florence Casaba. The second time, I searched directly within Google. Where did the other 2,952 items go? Into some phase warp between direct and indirect Google searching: Searching via the Firefox search box, *even when you're on Google*, yields 3,880.

At this point, I'm reminded that the Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson was a mathematician and logician. I'm sure he'd appreciate the extent to which I feel as though I'm looking at a table with little cakes saying "search me" and wondering whether I'll disappear into the woodwork or grow suddenly larger… I couldn't recreate the problem (but I've seen it before), so I'll stick with direct searches from now on. Which, done again, go back to 3,880.

If you start with 3,880, you wind up with 617—*more* than for Britney Crenshaw, not one-thirtieth as many. Redo the search with similar results included, and you get 877 of about 935—nearly half again as many as Crenshaw. Mysterious enough?

But what of a phrase search? That's a disappointment. At this writing, there are *no* results for the phrase "florence casaba" in Google—although that will presumably cease to be true shortly after this issue of *Cites & Insights* appears.

Conclusions

It may be that there are *no* web pages mentioning either of these two names except indirectly or as search terms. There certainly aren't many. As for the two-word combinations, I'm not sure what you can conclude from a situation where Google says one word pair appears thirty times as often as another one—but when you ask to see the records, Google shows you nearly half again as many for the second word pair as for the first. Which word pair actually appears more often?

Let's not forget the other search engines. For this article I'll limit that to the two major competitors.

Yahoo! shows 139,000 (no "about") for Britney Crenshaw (as words), and shows its maximum of 1,000 actual pages. Repeating the search with similar results included yields 140,000—but, of course, you still can't show more than 1,000. The phrase "Britney Crenshaw" shows "4 of 7" or "4 of 15" with similar results included (not clear why I can't see the other three or 11 records)—and it appears that one page, from ESPN, actually *does* have that name, a misspelled version of Brittney Crenshaw, a basketball player at Florida Atlantic University. As for poor Florence, there are 8,990 records for the two words, turning into 545 of 1,870 when you try to show all of them—and with omitted results, that starts out as 8,640 and becomes 1,820, hitting the 1,000-viewable limit. For the phrase? For once, the two engines agree: Zero.

Live Search says there are 81,000 results for Britney Crenshaw (as words), and hits its 1,000-page limit, at that point saying there are 1,000 results (but only when you attempt to go beyond record 999; otherwise, on the 20th page of 50 results each, it shows 80,800 results). Oddly, Live Search shows higher page numbers to click on (e.g., up to 24 50-result pages)—but won't go past 1,000 (page 20). The phrase "Britney Crenshaw" yields five results, not including the legit ESPN typo. As for Florence, you get an astonishing **909,000** results with an odd note: "Results are included for other related terms. Show just the results for florence casaba." That yields 3,350. Your guess as to what's happening is as good as mine (or that of any other naïve searcher). The smaller set quickly turns into 653 viewable records. The larger set hits the 1,000-record limit, showing 655,000 results at that point. (It appears that Live Search is doing some slightly crazed stemming in the initial search, as results show "Canary" as a highlighted word in many of the results. Maybe you can find a relationship between Canary and Casaba; damned if I can.) As a phrase, "Florence Casaba" yields nothing: Once again, agreement!

What Started All This

I've thought about doing more numeracy columns for a while—and a number of occasions have arisen where Google's results have caused me and others some confusion. But a specific incident pushed this article from idea to epaper.

Tim Spalding posted "Getting real: Libraries are missing books" on March 26, 2008 at the *Thingology* blog (www.librarything.com/thingology). He takes libra-

ries, especially academic libraries, to task for not buying Jason Fried's *Getting Real: The smarter, faster, easier way to build a successful web application*. *Getting Real* is published through Lulu and was, at the time, the sixth best seller there. That could mean several hundred sales, but probably means a few thousand. The earlier PDF version supposedly sold 30,000 copies. Worldcat.org showed three libraries holding the book in March 2008; there are five or six in mid-June 2008.

One of Spalding's arguments for the significance of the book: "Google records 166,000 mentions."

His more general argument is that libraries are ignoring Lulu books (generally true) and Lulu isn't *all* crap (also true)—and he can't see how libraries could miss a book as important as *Getting Real*.

A number of comments offered reasons libraries don't and can't cope with Lulu and its flood of unreviewed, unedited books. I added this comment:

> Speaking as a Lulu user (five books) and library person, two notes:
>
> 1. Lulu isn't a publisher. It's a service supplier/fulfillment agency. (Technically, if you buy a Lulu ISBN, then it's the publisher of record, but that's all.) What that means--apart from Lulu books being self-published, not vanity press books (a distinction I'd like to see more people make!), is that it's entirely up to the author to do publicity, send out review copies, etc., etc.
>
> 2. With more than 150,000 new titles published each year, it's hardly surprising that libraries don't pick up most titles that aren't reviewed in some form--and most Lulu titles don't show up in review media.
>
> My top Lulu title shows 44 library copies at Worldcat. That's without print reviews, but with fairly strong name recognition among librarians. Still, I'd bet that roughly zero of those sales came from people browsing Lulu...
>
> I'm a little surprised that a book was sufficiently well-publicized to sell 30,000 copies through Lulu and only make it into three libraries. That sounds unlikely, frankly, but I certainly won't argue with the author's reporting on sales... Still, with that many sales, you'd expect (a) that the author would spring for an ISBN, which would improve visibility and orderability, (b) that the author might even spring for Ingram distribution, which would make it easier to buy...and probably get it into Amazon.
>
> Well, and maybe (c) choose a primary title that doesn't duplicate so many other books!

I misread Spalding's post on one item: He didn't claim 30,000 Lulu sales. But I was certainly not ready for Spalding's response, which began: "What you're missing here is that someone like Fried doesn't care about your ISBNs and he doesn't care about your Ingram. They are irrelevant to him and to much of his audience," continued by touting 37signal's blog's Technorati rating and noting "I doubt if there's a librarian blog in the world with half that," and tossing in another comment about not needing ISBNs.

I responded once more, before it became clear that Spalding wanted to lecture more than discuss and that, for someone trying to sell to libraries, he's pretty dismissive of librarians if they disagree with him.

I noted that they weren't "my" ISBNs or Ingram; I was just offering reasons. I also noted that being mentioned lots of times on a publisher's own blog doesn't offer any indication of quality. Then I did a different search for the book on Google, getting 654 hits (115 records) rather than Spalding's claimed result. And I noted that one library blog *does* have one-third the Technorati rating of 37signal's blog (counting links rather than authority, that's true). Spalding seemed hostile about my questioning of his Google count, saying he could write a PERL script to get beyond the 1,000 record limit and finishing with "Your point is that Google is lying?" He threw in some other questionable statements (e.g., that 37signal's blog is read more than all but a few magazines), but after noting a couple of them I decided to stop responding.

That left the Google issue open. Is Google lying? I'm not sure that's a meaningful question. I *am* sure that, for real-world purposes, most large Google search result numbers are meaningless. Spalding calls the number of hits on the book's short title (to which he added the author's name) "astounding." So let's play with this book title a little more…

(Others have been discussing Spalding's underlying point, that at least some libraries should be paying more attention to self-published and other non-mainstream materials. It's an interesting discussion. I'm not directly addressing the underlying issue in this essay.)

Another digression on blog readership

First, another digression having to do with numbers and reality. Spalding claims that 37signal's blog, which he calls Signal to Noise (the name is actually *A design and usability blog: Signal vs. Noise* and it's at www.37signals.com/svn), has a readership "certainly higher than all but a few magazines."

As for readership, 37signals' blog states that up front: Feedburner shows 90,652 readers (as of June 12, 2008). Let's say 100,000 readers overall—which might be low, but probably isn't all that low. Of course, you can define "a few" any way you want, but the top **101** magazines each had at least 925,000 circulation in 2006 (according to Wikipedia, based on *New York Job Source* reporting). Circulation isn't dropping drastically, at least not at this point. MPA's report

for total *paid and verified* circulation for 2007, based on Audit Bureau of Circulation figures, shows the hundredth highest title (*Food & Wine*) with 940,983 circulation. How many other magazines circulate more paid copies than the free readership of 37signal's blog? An initial inspection of paid & audited numbers suggests at least 300 more, not including controlled circulation, freebies and newspapers. In any case, 400+ is more than "a few" by my standards.

Spalding seems to be saying jobbers or libraries should be paying attention to books mentioned in 37signal's blog because it's such a prominent source—but do jobbers or libraries pay attention to books mentioned in, say, *Backpacker* (349,598 paid & verified 2007 circulation) or *Super Chevy* (164,535) or *Model Railroader* (154,244) or *Easy Home Cooking* (331,727) or *North American Whitetail* (140,863) or *Garden Design* (258,805)?

We were talking about Google and Getting Real

Back to that issue: Just how astonishing is the web presence of 37signal's book?

I just did the same search Spalding had done: the phrase "getting real" and the word "37signals." It still shows "about 166,000," interesting given that it's now more than ten weeks later. And guess what? That search result *doesn't* hit the 1,000-record limit: Google shows 684 pages. To what extent is that self-promotion? Not much: Seven of the first 100 results were from 37signals.com and subdomains, and I didn't see that many elsewhere.

Ah, but the phrase "walt crawford" yields 619 pages (of "about 27,800"). So my personal web presence is almost as astonishing as that of 37signal's book! I consider myself a non-celebrity, appropriately not in the English-language *Wikipedia* because I'm not notable, although I'm reasonably well known within library circles. (Incidentally, "cites & insights" as a phrase shows "about 20,200"—but goes to "401-437 of 437.")

As a more interesting comparison, consider one of those obscure librarians in her blog persona. The phrase "shifted librarian" yields "about 187,000" in Google—*more* than the 37signals book—although slightly fewer records (582) are visible.

I wouldn't call any of these web presences astonishing. I'd call them all significant and quite similar: 582, 619, and 684 records respectively. Anything else is pure conjecture.

The alternatives

37signal's book is far more astonishing on Yahoo!: 418,000 (for the same search)—and it *does* hit the 1,000-record limit. But then, so am I; "walt crawford" yields 236,000 and also hits the 1,000-record limit. "cites & insights" gets 271,000 (hitting the limit) and "shifted librarian" yields 1,520,000 (hitting the limit). In other words, according to Yahoo!, "shifted librarian" is more than three times as astonishing as 37signals' book. So much for those obscure librarians?

Then there's Live Search. It shows a mere 95,100 for the 37signals book and hits the limit—but that's with the zooey default search. Using its real-search click, there's 82,100 results—and the viewing limit is there once more. The others? "walt crawford" yields 27,200 (and hits the viewing limit), "cites & insights" shows 109,000, but that's down to 43,000 when the viewing limit is reached. "shifted librarian" shows 386,000—again, around four times as many as the 37signals book—and by the time you hit the viewing limit, that's only down to 220,000.

A Few Other Samples

"Google Fight" (www.googlefight.com) is presumably just for fun—the site invites you to enter two phrases and "make a fight," returning the "results" for each phrase. Let's look at the raw numbers and whatever reality seems plausible for some of those fights:

- "Usain Bolt" and "Asafa Powell" (two runners): Reported as 672,000 for Bolt, 599,000 for Powell. Viewable results for word pairs: 587 for Bolt, 632 for Powell. As phrases, 702,000 (!) for Bolt (588 viewable), 599,000 for Powell (635 viewable). Google Fight says Bolt wins—but Powell has more viewable records.
- "Anna Nicole Smith" and "Pamela Anderson." The reported "fight" has Anderson a clear winner, with 22.3 million to Smith's 7.36 million. You can view 739 records for Smith (as three words) and 729 for Anderson—once again, the "winner" seems to be reversed (and it's a difference of just over 1%, not more than 3 to 1). As phrases, Anderson moves up to 26.3 million (740 viewable) and Smith moves up to 8.2 million (742 viewable). Clear as mud.
- Here's one that's topical rather than a personal name: Christmas tree vs. Christmas pudding. Googlefight shows 15.6 million to 846,000 (tree vs. pudding). Google itself? Tree: 29.4 million (words), 19.9 million (words), still not hitting the 1,000-record viewing limit (889). Pudding: 803,000 (words), 555,000 (phrase), and nearly as many viewable records (822).

Conclusions

I could go through many more examples, and so could you. Try a few on your own—both as words

and as phrases. I find it interesting that you'll frequently *see* more records in Yahoo and Live Search, even though Google may show larger result sizes.

The Spalding incident didn't involve the words-vs.-phrase issue, which arises in so many public claims about what's on the web. If you're interested, the *words* walt Crawford yield "about 661,000" in Google; shifted librarian, "about 361,000," and cites & insights "about 339,000" (oddly enough, *fewer*—about 336,000—without the ampersand). Oh, and the words getting real 37signals yield about 644,000.

This isn't really about the prominence of 37signals' book. If you wanted web prominence, you could try "cory doctorow"—which yields, about 963,000, and even then *only 769 are visible*. I think the conclusions are the same:

- The initial result count for a Google (or competitor's) search is essentially meaningless, either on its own or (especially) in comparison with result counts for other searches.
- In a surprisingly large number of cases, the *viewable* results of a Google search fall well within the 1,000-record viewing limit imposed by all three major web search engines.
- Viewable results *may* be better measures of web prominence—but they may not.
- For most uses and most users, the key phrases are **one, two, ten, some; one hundred, nine hundred, one thousand, many**. Most people won't go beyond the first ten—and maybe not beyond the first two. Anything larger than that is "some." Dogged users may go to the first hundred or even the first nine hundred—but beyond 1,000, all you know is that there are "many" records, *regardless of the stated count*.

I think we tend to bring our traditional search experience with us to open web search results, and that doesn't work. If you get a large result in most traditional search engines, you can—at least theoretically—plow through the whole thing.

I'm not criticizing Google or Yahoo! or Live Search here. (Well, maybe Live Search—it seems more blatantly mysterious than either of the others.) I'm just saying these are bad numbers, particularly when making comparisons. "About" means they can't be taken seriously as indicators.

Interesting & Peculiar Products

Kill A Watt

The February 2008 *PC World*'s "Geek tech" column (by Tom Mainelli) isn't directly about this device—a $21 power-monitoring box. You plug it into the wall and plug something into it, and find out how much power you're using for the device. That can be revealing, particularly for the many electronic products that are never entirely off unless you pull the plug—which includes anything you turn on with a remote control.

I'm tempted to buy one of these, even though I think we've already done most of the things it might help with (or maybe I don't want to know how much power our ten-year-old TV draws when it's off!). I'm pretty sure my LCD display draws little or no power when it's switched off. I *think* the same is true for my all-in-one printer—but in any case, it and my new notebook computer are both plugged into a power strip I turn off when I'm not using the computer. (Why? Because I'm pretty sure the power block/charger *will* draw power all the time, and don't see any reason to let it.) I'm also guessing, with some certainty, that the notebook uses considerably less power than the 5.5-year-old PC it replaces—it uses integrated graphics instead of a graphics card, I'm guessing a 1.7GHz Core 2 Duo is more power-efficient than an aging 2.2GHz Pentium 4, and there's the objective knowledge that the notebook fan *at its loudest* is far quieter than the desktop's fans were. But I don't know. Do you know how much power you're using for devices you're not using?

Keeping Tabs on Financial Data Online

Here's another one from February 2008 *PC World*—and this time I have mixed feelings. Erik Larkin's "Privacy Watch" urges readers to use "online monitoring and alerting services" to make sure nothing odd is happening with your checking, savings and credit card accounts. He specifically applauds Mint.com:

> If you give Mint.com the user name and password for each of your financial accounts—including checking, savings, credit cards, and even PayPal—it will monitor them all daily and pull the transactions into its site for you to check… You can also have Mint.com send you alerts based on specified thresholds…

The magazine also gives Mint.com an innovation award. Neato, right? Of course, it's "still in beta" (like Gmail and many others)—and "managed to lock one of my accounts because of failed log-in attempts."

Here's the thing. In a column on fighting identity theft (there's nothing about privacy here), Larkin's encouraging us to put *all our passwords and account numbers* on a commercial website. We're not paying directly (it's free). The site has impressive sets of certificates about encryption and all that and claims it's not actually *storing* any of that important stuff. And

wow, do you get all sorts of aggregated information once you've trusted Mint with *all your financial data*.

Call me a Luddite, but I really don't *want* all my accounts to be available at one online place, particularly one where I don't have a firm contractual relationship. When I'm told that an unknown company "carefully controls employee access," I'm reminded of the 100% success very large well-established companies have had in that regard. For you, this might be a great convenience. Not for me, thanks.

Hard Disk Chic?

PC Magazine's Editors' Choice review of the SimpleDrive 500GB Portable Hard Drive carries the title "Sleek, simple storage." Indeed, while this compact (8.5x5x1.5") external drive doesn't carry a Ferrari logo, it's designed by Pininfarina. But then, you don't pay for that logo (see elsewhere in this section): Even though it's a full 7200RPM drive and has a good software package (both Windows and Mac) on the disk itself, it's only $170 for 500GB.

Just a Table Radio

Here's how the blurb in *Sound & Vision* begins: "Think about it: You're always going to need some kind of table radio somewhere, so why not get one with an iPod dock?" Thus begins a preview of the Cambridge SoundWorks i765 iPod radio, which also includes a CD/DVD drive and alarm clock. I'll admit we don't have a table radio, but maybe the writer's right. On the other hand, $500 is a fancy price for a table radio.

Of course, it's all relative. Last time around (February 2008), I mentioned *another* table radio that includes an alarm clock and CD/DVD drive—for a modest $3,000! (*Also see below*.) But, you know, to keep the price down, they don't include the iPod dock: It's another $200. By comparison, the Cambridge is a pauper's table radio.

Speaking of $3,000 Table Radios…

I've seen more rave reviews for the Meridian F80 Home Entertainment System. Just as a reminder: It's a 14-pound table radio, an arc measuring 16" wide by 9" high (at highest point) by 7.3" deep. It's a *fancy* table radio: Along with AM-FM and alarm, you get a DVD/CD drive (with video output), and there's a "subwoofer" along with two 3" speakers. (The designer calls it a subwoofer. I don't see how it's possible to have a true subwoofer in a cabinet that small—but the term "subwoofer" gets misused all the time, even if not usually by high-end companies like Meridian.) Oh, and Ferrari puts its horse logo on the table radio and the outside of the arc is in one of the Ferrari colors—Rosso Corsa (dark red), Modena Giallo (yellow), Argento Nurburgring (bright silver), Nero (black) or Bianco Avus (off-white).

The review that surprised me is in the April 2008 *Stereophile*. It's a favorable review; I expected that. The reviewer basically writes off the price—hey, if it makes you happy, who cares?—and I can't really argue with that. The writer says it "might be the best table radio ever." For $3,000, one would certainly hope so.

But… *Stereophile* measures most all of the stuff it tests. The reviews don't depend on the measurements (comments on the measurements run in a "sidebar" under the review proper, and are done *after* the review is written—usually by a different writer), but the measurements are extensive, apparently done with considerable care and expertise, and fascinating in their own right. (That's particularly true for some audiophile delights where the "musical ability" of the device is apparently there because the actual fidelity is demonstrably awful, rolling off lows and highs.)

I was looking forward to the measurements for this $3,000 charmer: Just how low does that "subwoofer" actually go, for example?

They're not there. For some reason, this very favorable review of a device that, while relatively inexpensive by audiophile standards, is bloody expensive by table-radio standards or even one-piece music system standards, *has no measurements* in a magazine that consistently measures everything.

Mysterious and disappointing.

More Ferrari Audio Stuff

The May 2008 *Home Theater* devotes two pages to the Art.Engine—an "officially licensed, hand-built, 47-inch-tall two-channel wireless audio system in one enclosure." Each side of the enclosure is a "NACA duct—a low-drag cooling technology used by Ferrari." And, of course, this four-foot-high speaker system comes in Ferrari colors.

The description and picture are a little odd: Each side has eight 3" "woofers" topped by a tweeter, which would seem to be well above ear level for most applications. Actually, it's not fair to say that the Art.Engine gets two pages: Most of one page is devoted to a side view of a Ferrari—the car, that is.

There's no indication of how this speaker system (OK, sound system, since it includes four 200-watt amplifiers) *sounds*, and I'm not sure that's even the point. What's stressed: "Production…has been limited

to 1,000 units. Each one…comes with a certificate of authenticity." It sells for $20,000. I won't comment on the speaker as pictured; my aesthetic sense doesn't match those for whom this is designed. Neither does my wallet (although, if this was actually a high-end speaker system, $20,000 wouldn't be considered outrageous), so that's OK.

Single-Source Surround Sound

So you have this great new HDTV and you know most contemporary DVDs and TV programs come with 5.1-channel surround sound. You also know you're not ready to place six speakers and all the accompanying cables in your living room.

One answer is a soundbar—a single device that aims to emulate all five surround channels (and maybe the .1 subwoofer) through multiple speakers and digital signal processing. It's an attractive notion: One long, shallow device sitting under your big-screen TV is all you need.

The April 2008 *Home Theater* devotes a dozen pages to a discussion of the likely market for soundbars and reasonably controlled tests of five such devices. The units range from $800 to $1,400 (Yamaha makes several soundbars, but the group review includes a middle unit rather than the $1,800 higher-end unit). They come from Philips, Marantz, Yamaha, Denon and Polk. They include anywhere from six to 23 actual speakers, in either one or two cabinets (two systems house the subwoofer separately). In terms of price, one of them's a ringer: The Polk SurroundBar 50 ($1,100) requires an external amplifier or receiver, while the others all include amplifiers.

How did they do? So-so. None did a convincing job of simulating surround sound. The Polk scored highest (barely) and was generally judged to have the most natural sound. The five reviewers didn't show much enthusiasm for any of them. One simply refused to state a favorite, saying he'd look for a full 5.1 system in the same price range "and live with the aesthetics" to get real surround and better sound.

Oddly enough, the April 2008 *Sound & Vision* also had a (considerably briefer) roundup of even more soundbars—seven of them, ranging from Boston Acoustics' $350 TVee Model Two (just 2.1 channels) and ZVox' $700 Model 425 to the higher-end Yamaha, the $1,800 YSP-4000. That one gets the "Certified and Recommended" seal of approval, although it's still not "as immersive as that of discrete speakers." The high-end Yamaha has *forty-two* speakers in a 40-inch-wide cabinet.

A Cheaper Turntable

Two years ago (in MY BACK PAGES) I mentioned the Continuum Caliburn/Cobra/Castellon turntable/arm combination: it cost $89,000 (without cartridge), and one audio reviewer proclaimed it worth every penny, calling people who hated the product cynical and self-loathing. (Another magazine didn't much care for it.)

Continuum Audio Labs has seen the light: The company's introduced a junior model for audiophiles on a budget (the original combo is now up to $125,000). The Criterion and Copperhead combo doesn't include a stand, but it's merely $55,595. It's not as good, of course—after all, you're spending less than $56K (you still need a cartridge and preamp).

Here's the fun part: The reviewer's "early production sample" was out of spec—the arm got stuck partway through every LP. Woops! Well, you know, when you're building on the cheap, things like quality control have to take a back seat. The reviewer's comment on getting a *defective turntable* that costs nearly $60,000? "Better it happen to a reviewer than to a paying customer." No big thing, right?

Network Music Player

I'm thoroughly impressed with the Linn Klimax DS Network Music Player, as reviewed in the March 2008 *Stereophile*. I'm particularly impressed with what it *doesn't* do. It doesn't store digitized audio files; for that you need a storage drive. It doesn't allow you to organize your files or build playlists, although they do provide software to run on the notebook or tablet *that you supply* (the software's not very good, apparently). It doesn't include a CD or DVD drive so you can rip to the storage drive you provide.

What does it do? It connects your storage drive to your stereo system, preferably over a wired network. So you can play those ripped files over your stereo. It does high-quality digital-to-analog conversion along the way. And it costs $20,000.

The measured performance is excellent. It had damn well better be.

Nokia E90 Communicator

Want a cell phone with "stellar voice quality," "heavenly keyboards" (a full QWERTY keyboard inside a clamshell lid) and "robust" applications, including Quickoffice? It's a little big (5.2x2.2x0.8") and chunky (7.4oz.), but it's got capabilities up the wazoo.

Oh yes, there's the price: $1,099—and, by the way, it doesn't offer U.S. 3G support.

Free Software

After those pricey devices, it's only fair to mention the other end of the scale: Free software, as described in the March 2008 *PC Magazine* list of 157 tools. They claim that "popular apps" equivalent to these freebies would run $5,183—but equivalence is in the eye of the beholder. Still, there's a lot of good stuff here, including old standbys such as GIMP, Firefox and Audacity and others ranging from the KompoZer web authoring program to Virtual PC 2007 from some company in Redmond.

Indoor HDTV Antennas

This one's from a liblog: *Hidden peanuts* by Chad Haefele (www.hiddenpeanuts.com). A June 1, 2007 post (I'm running late on this) reviews the Philips PHDTV1 indoor antenna; he's using it with his ATSC (high-def digital) tuner on his computer, and it apparently works great. In general, broadcast digital TV is supposed to be yes:no—either you get a great picture or you get no picture at all, not ghosts and shadows. I've heard that a lot more people can get clear over-the-air broadcast digital TV than could get good broadcast analog TV; that seems to be the case for Haefele.

When Haefele wrote about it, the price was $20 to $30—a bargain if it means you can drop cable. Checking now, I see prices in the $10.30 to $20 range and some quite positive reviews. (As usual for online reviews, they're not uniformly positive.)

Whether at home or at your library, you will be moving to digital TV *soon*—one way or another. That may mean a set-top adapter and sticking with your aging analog set, or getting analog signals from your cable provider. But it may also mean, for some of us, moving from cable back to broadcast TV—maybe with a reasonably-priced indoor antenna.

Small but Mighty: The Sony XEL-1

I've seen formal reviews and informal commentaries on this little wonder, including an extensive review in the April 2008 *Sound & Vision*. Someday I need to go to a Sony store and look at one…

Here's the downside, enough to convince most reasonable people to pass this one by: It's an 11"-diagonal desktop TV—and since it's widescreen, that means there's not a lot of height. It sells for $2,500. And it doesn't have all that many video input options. And it's not really HDTV: Resolution is only 960x540.

Absurd, right? Yes, for most people—and Sony probably doesn't expect to sell hundreds of thousands. But then there are the positives:

- It's the first production OLED TV.
- The screen is three millimeters thick. "About the same thickness as three credit cards."
- The picture is, by all accounts, nothing short of stunning—with an expanded color spectrum, superb contrast and the whole shebang. Every writeup I've seen has been glowing.

The XEL-1 is primarily a technology demonstration. It suggests that, if Sony or somebody else can scale OLED up to 42 to 50 inches, the results will be spectacular.

A Lot Bigger, A Little Pricier

Moving from that tiny gem, *PC World*'s April 2008 issue includes a review of 50-inch and 52-inch HDTVs. The Best Buy of the lot, using their testing, is actually *cheaper* than the Sony: Samsung's $2,400 FP-T5084. It's another one of those strange reviews: The Samsung scores "Good" for picture quality across the board (HDTV, SDTV, DVD), where the second-place Vizio and fourth-place Sony Bravia both score "Very Good" on two of three scales and "Good" on the third. Apparently, features matter more than performance when comparing the Samsung to the even cheaper 52" Vizio ($2,200)—I guess the Sony loses points because it's considerably more expensive (52", $3,500) even though it "posted the highest overall image-quality score" and "delivered unrivaled brightness and contrast."

Group Reviews and Editors' Choices

A *PC World* February 2008 roundup looks at 17 flat-screen LCD displays in the 19"-and-larger range, all of them widescreen. Best Buy honors go to the $220 LG Electronics L196WTY-BF for a 19" display (although you'll get better graphics quality with the $270 Samsung SyncMaster 932GW) and $260 HP w2007 among 20" and 22" displays (it's 20.1 inches and offers very good performance across the board). Want a *really* big screen? They didn't rate screens 30" and up, but the $1,000 Samsung SyncMaster 275T (27") gets the Best Buy for 25.5" to 28" displays. Of course, instead of a 1920x1200 pixel $1,000 display, you *could* buy two 22" displays (each 1680x1050) and have both a lot more screen estate and $480 left over, but what fun would that be?

The February 2008 *PC Magazine* gives an Editors' Choice to Epson's $250 Perfection V500 Photo, a scanner specifically oriented to photo scanning, using an LED light source (with no warmup time) and offering good speed, good scanning and Digital ICE to remove dust and scratches.

If you want to print those photos, Epson scores another Editors' Choice for the $100 PictureMate

Dash, a relatively big photo printer—but one that offers a big LCD, prints from a range of sources, prints quickly (42 seconds per 4x6 photo) and is reasonably cheap (25.3 cents per glossy). Another Epson photo printer—the $200 PictureMate Zoom—gets a March 2008 Editors' Choice. Same price per print, same speed, probably the same quality. What makes this one worth an extra $100? A builtin DVD reader/CD-RW burner so you can save photos from a memory card to a CD and print photos from optical discs.

For business color printing, where photos aren't a primary need, your best choice right now might be the $400 Brother HL-4040CN color laser printer, according to a roundup in the May 2008 *PC World*. It offers superior text quality and fast text printing (19.3 ppm), although the design is "sometimes awkward."

Looking for a webcam—something a little more flexible than one built into a notebook's lid? A *PC Magazine* roundup awards Editors' Choice to the $100 Logitech QuickCam Pro 9000—"an order of magnitude better than any competitor." Wow. *Ten times as good* as any competitor? Maybe not, but clearly superior, with 2MP resolution, a Carl Zeiss lens and generally fine performance (although audio isn't great and the software isn't wonderful). The only alternative they suggest is the $25 Hercules Deluxe Optical Glass—it's cheap and easy.

Flash-RAM based MP3 players keep getting more memory. A May 2008 *PC World* roundup of such players includes two with 32GB RAM. One of them, from Creative Zen, only costs $300. It's the Best Buy, with superior overall design, very good overall audio quality and a good signal-to-noise ratio. It also has FM and voice recording (as do most non-Apple players, even my $50 Sansa and the #2-rated $90 Creative Zen V Plus) and can handle photos and video; the 2.5" color screen displays 320x240 pixels. The obvious competitor, Apple's iPod Touch, has a bigger, higher-resolution screen and wi-fi, but (like all Apple players) it lacks FM and recording—and it's $499 for the 32GB version. It comes in fourth, just behind the iPod Nano ($199 for 8GB), which has the best signal-to-noise ratio of any of the top five.

How about "green PCs"? The April 2008 *PC Magazine* discusses a new suite of tests to earn a *PC Magazine* Green Seal and applies those tests to a handful of desktop and notebooks. So far, they haven't found a unit that deserves both a Green Seal and Editors' Choice, but the issue does note four Green Seal units: the Zonbu Desktop Mini ($99 with contract, as it's a Linux frontend to rented online storage), Apple Mac mini ($799), Lenovo ThinkCentre a61e (a relatively compact Vista desktop), and the HP Compaq 27109p notebook ($2,457, a convertible tablet).

Maybe you want a bargain. The April 2008 *PC World* tests a dozen low-cost machines ($750 or less for desktops, $1,000 or less for laptops) and gives Best Buy seals to the $689 Dell Inspiron 530 (dedicated graphics card, good speed, decent capacity and a 19" display) and the $900 HP Pavilion dv2660se notebook (a "designer notebook" with excellent battery life).

Or a little more basic computing speed—from a quad-core "Penryn" (Intel) or "Phenom" (AMD) CPU. A roundup in the March 2008 *PC World* gives Best Buy honors to the $4,299 CyberPower Power Infinity Pro, a Penryn-based (Core 2 Extreme QX9650) system with 1.8 *terabytes* of hard disk (in a RAID configuration), a 22" LCD display and high-end graphics with 768MB dedicated graphics memory.

PC Magazine reviews a group of "ultraportable" and mainstream laptops in the May 2008 issue. An Apple gets one of two Editors' Choice honors, but not the one you might expect. The ultrathin Apple MacBook Air ties for second among ultraportables; winner is Sony's $2,499 VAIO VGN-SZ791N—3.9 pounds, but with a 2.5GHz Core 2 Duo T9300 CPU, nVidia GeForce graphics, 4GB RAM, a 250GB hard disk, excellent performance and more-than-decent battery life (3:49 on *PC*'s test suite). The winning Apple is the mainstream MacBook Pro 15-inch (LED), $1,999; it "oozes sexiness" and is the lightest 15" widescreen laptop around; it also gets good battery life and is reasonably well equipped, with 2GB RAM, 512MB dedicated graphics RAM, and a 120GB hard disk.

PC World tested ultralight notebooks in May 2008, using a three-pound cutoff that eliminates some of the units just noted. The Best Buy in this group is the $2,696 Lenovo ThinkPad X300. The MacBook Air came in dead last for performance and features.

Retrospective

Pointing with Pride, Part 3

I've received no feedback on these RETROSPECTIVES—either good or bad. But I receive very little feedback on most *C&I* essays, so I'll assume some of you find these pieces interesting, some of you skip right over them and some aren't sure what to think. Such is life.

February 2001: Number 3

Just as lots of folks went overboard with web hype at the turn of the century, and lots of folks go overboard with "X changes everything" nonsense today, quite a few of

us—including me—swung too far in the other direction when things turned sour in the first dot.com bust. (Yes, "the first dot.com bust." Now it's more of a rolling process, hopefully thinning out nonsense as things go along. I used the neologism "dead.com" in the same essay to describe pointless and defunct .coms.)

In "The Pendulum Swings" (first part of TRENDS & QUICK TAKES, the opening essay in this issue), I spotted that issue:

> The Web changes everything. We've been hearing that for years, absurdly simplistic though it is. Now we get the reaction: dot.coms are dead, the Web is pointless, there's no New Economy, it's all a pack of lies. People (journalists) went overboard believing the hype. Some now go overboard with disenchantment—and the truth lies somewhere in between.

A ZDnet essay by Andreas Pfeiffer, "Has the Internet peaked?" noted cases where businesses were moving back offline, teachers reporting that students were getting bored with the web, online content companies producing print publications. Mostly, Pfeiffer says, we were gaining a more realistic appreciation of the new medium (and moving away from the notion that the web replaces all other media). Then, in closing, Pfeiffer mentions "earth-shattering, headline-grabbing developments" yet to come…including interactive television. My note:

> *Interactive television* as an earth-shattering development? Ah well. At heart, Andreas Pfeiffer is still an industry analyst, with all that implies.

I'll stand by that particular bit of skepticism.

There was more good stuff in T&QT. Fox accused the University of Wisconsin of trademark infringement…because the Why Files science education site "dilutes the distinctiveness of the X-Files name." Honest. I couldn't make this stuff up. Without researching the details of the suit, it's worth noting that The Why Files is still around at whyfiles.org/, having outlasted the X-Files by several years. I should note that UW's operation is *not* The Why? Files (www.thewhyfiles.net), a "UFOlogy" portal—or *The Why-Files* (www.rpi.edu/~sofkam/ISUNY/why-files.html), a now-defunct newsletter of the Inquiring Skeptics of Upper New York.

I mentioned an odder-than-usual pair of defunct web "businesses," one a little shady, the other hopeless. RhinoPoint promised you'd be paid for filling out monthly online surveys—but you paid $15 to register first. The "company" disappeared, presumably with some significant number of $15 payments. SweepSurf.com—formerly MValue.com—promised to pay $0.50 an hour for viewing ads as you surf the internet. It shut down properly and sent apologies to members. Now, Virgin Mobile's doing something similar—but it offers minutes, not money.

Same essay—one just full of millennial goodness. Scott Spanbauer of *PC World* wrote "Libraries share books much like Napster shares songs, although it's illegal to photocopy entire books in a library." This was the *real* Napster, not the current legal MP3 sales site of the same name. My headline: "Arggh." Circulating books, to one borrower at a time with no other borrower able to use the book simultaneously, is absolutely legal and protected by the First Sale doctrine, and even a PC journalist should have been able to make the distinction.

Several pages discussed ebook developments, including the whole sorry story of Gemstar's acquisition (and dismemberment) of Nuvomedia and Softbook, Gemstar's bizarre plans for making ebooks work (no online advertising, only print advertising; only a few thousand bestsellers, nothing like a broad selection; selling through electronics stores, not bookstores), an experienced journalist thinking ebooks had real possibility because Jeff Bezos was (at the time) *opposed* to them ("when you hear yesterday's innovators badmouth the new kid on the block, take note"), the introduction of a 133dpi notebook, and Mick O'Leary's assurance that ebooks were about to take off and "in a big surge"—using Stephen King's "Riding the Bullet" novella as proof. In 2001, O'Leary was certain that "authors, publishers and readers are moving toward ebooks." The big surge and rapid movement have so far been postponed.

Remember the :CueCat? Using one with LibraryThing? I devoted nearly three pages to ":Cueless in Cyberspace," suggesting that :CueCat (don't forget that leading colon!) held a "special place among last year's innovations…a place somewhat similar to DivX." Maybe that's because I couldn't see the point in scanning a box of Kraft macaroni and cheese to get to the Kraft website; wouldn't you just key in the URL (or, these days, Google "Kraft")? There were some mildly positive reviews, but most experienced journalists saw it for what it was. I was bemused by the company's claim that, even though most people received :CueCats free, in the mail, without requesting them or signing for them, they didn't *own* the devices—they were only on loan. (Hackers started in on :CueCats early, and the company sent cease & desist letter.) The US Postal Service is quite clear about things mailed to you that you didn't request: You own them and owe nothing for them.

Trends for the new year: always good stuff. *FamilyPC* had ten projections from ten experts for great 2001 developments. Philippe Kahn had the right idea, a few years early: We'd all be carrying "candy-bar size wireless devices that combine digital cameras and cell phones." Well, not *all* of us, even now, but… Jack Myers thought we'd all buy DVRs in 2001—and they'd be embedded into TV sets. Michael Wolff thought there would be *no* pure Internet businesses by the end of 2001! Ben Mandell saw the wired home (and grocery-tracking refrigerators) as a surefire development. Joyce Schwartz had us *all* switching to internet telephony in 2001. There were a couple I hoped (but didn't expect) to see actually happen; go back to the issue to read those.

Give *The Industry Standard* credit for being dubious that we knew which companies would survive the struggle for computer-making dominance. That list was Compaq, Dell, Gateway and IBM. Interesting: Only one of those four companies survives as a PC maker—Dell. Compaq's been swallowed by HP; Gateway's a brand name for Acer; IBM sold its PC business to Lenovo. On the other hand, the same issue called Larry Ellison a "big winner" and Bill Gates a "big loser"—based partly on stock holdings.

And, while LCD displays were getting better and cheaper, they were *still* very expensive. A roundup in *PC Magazine* covered 15" LCDs—costing $700 to $1,240! I thought that was a ridiculous price for an undersized display. Still do. The same "Review Watch" column had an astonishing review of net appliances—with "recommended" seals for three appliances that could only handle email (no attachments, no saved mail) and low-end web surfing through a no-choice ISP. Finally, consider improvements in some areas: A roundup of internal ATA hard drives for Macs gave top rating to a $190 Seagate holding 40GB…and that was an excellent price at the time, particularly for a Mac drive.

November 2001: Number 13

This issue was pure miscellany—no essays, lots of piece-by-piece material. A few highlights:

- Windows XP was on its way, and other than the configuration-sensitive activation requirement, most reactions were positive.
- Ebooks got almost five pages, including notes from M.J. Rose's excellent coverage, a *bunch* of stuff from and about eBookWeb (a site founded by true believers and dedicated to the idea that ebooks will *replace* print books), an odd admission about actual sales (for the time—that Time Warner's "#1 bestselling ebook at Amazon for June" sold *hundreds* of copies, not in June but overall), and the bizarre case of Scott Adams selling a new book exclusively in ebook form—even though Adams admitted he had never read an ebook.
- I did a *long* commentary on an even longer group of articles, *PC Magazine*'s celebration of the 20th anniversary of the PC. It included such goodies as George Gilder attacking Bill Joy for being nervous about nanotechnology and genetic engineering and for offering "a tonic for beleaguered socialists," noting that the techno-left and "Greens" are "the main adversary of freedom and faith." Ray Kurzweil assured us that "computation will be everywhere…embedded in everything from our clothing and eyeglasses to our bodies and brains" *by 2010*, a prediction that I'm comfortable in saying is nonsense. (I asked: "With all this computation and embedded chips, why would we have eyeglasses?") Kurzweil believes that, two years from now, we'll have web-enabled nanobots in our bloodstream, capable of switching us from reality to virtual reality and blocking sensory input and actual movement. Based on programming received over the web. The cluster of articles also includes profiles of people who changed *your* life, including Jeff Hawkins (Palm), Seth Warhsavky (Internet Entertainment Group, a porn peddler), Bob Stephens (Adaptec), Esther Dyson—all people who changed *your* life. Right.
- A *First Monday* article claimed that the *Online Journal of Current Clinical Trials,* first published in September 1991, was "the world's first online peer-reviewed journal." That's so wrong it's almost painful—by at least four years and at least half a dozen journals. For a supposedly-refereed article, this was astonishingly ill-informed writing.
- A reminder of the Good Old Days in REVIEW WATCH: Best Buy reviews for two Samsung displays (both CRTs), both showing "maximum resolution" of 1920x1440 pixels. Except that the specifications for the displays make it clear that one could only *physically* display 1407x1055 while the other could only display 1292x969. These days, specifications for displays usually show actual viewable pixels, not a "maximum" that's not physically possible.

July 2002: Number 23

Remember the great PLoS pledge of 2001? 30,000 scientists pledged they would not publish in, sub-

scribe to, or serve as an editor for any journal that didn't offer unrestricted free distribution to articles within six months of publication. Pretty impressive, but publishers concluded it was a bluff. They called and the scientists folded. The lead essay was about that unfortunate poker game and various Grand Solutions for the serials crisis—including the idea that journals should disappear and web links become the standard for refereeing. (The person suggesting that also claimed that up to three-quarters of academic library expenses are for administration of print journals, a remarkable claim at best.)

COPYRIGHT CURRENTS—a third of this issue—considered "Living with DMCA—and Lots More." IEEE instituted new conditions for its many computer science journals, one of which was that authors had to affirm that their work didn't contravene DMCA. EFF published a landmark publication on three years of DMCA. I was unwilling to mention the (trivial) details of the procedure for "cracking" Sony's idiot pseudo-CD copy protection (i.e., turning off AutoRun) because I couldn't risk a DMCA violation. Then there were CBDTPA and SSSCA, the Bronx cheer and the snake hiss, with lots of interesting byplay but, fortunately, no passed bills. Creative Commons was a new kid on the block and Eldred v Ashcroft was going forward. Meanwhile, Jamie Kellner of Turner Broadcasting said flatly that skipping ads is *theft*. "Your contract with the network when you get the show is you're going to watch the spots." Skip them, and "you're actually stealing the programming."

One PC columnist thought PCs should be marketed "like cars" and claimed mainstream car buyers don't care about horsepower and Civic drivers don't know anything about the (extremely sophisticated VTEC) engines in their cars. Another columnist decided the midrange PC was dead, that there were only two choices in PCS—cheapies around $750 and high-end units around $2,000. I think that was premature in 2002, but may be just about right in 2008.

We were told that two-megapixel digital cameras were fine for 8x10 prints on one page of *PC World*—and, later in the same issue (and written by the same journalist), that you needed three megapixels for 8x10. These days, you'd look askance at anything less than eight megapixels, but times have changed.

Looking at library-related literature, I was bemused by an *EContent* article that viewed the STM serials crisis almost entirely from the publishers' perspective—and that assured us Harvard, Yale and Stanford "will never compromise on coverage" no matter how much it costs. Guess again. I apologize for a mistake on my part. I read a claim that up to three-quarters of library budgets were "spent on the administrative expenses of dealing with print journals." I thought it was a ludicrous statement, which it is—but now I see that it comes directly from Andrew Odlyszko. That did, to be sure, give the writer a solution for library budget problems: Get rid of staff and use the saved money to pay for electronic-only access to the journals. "Internal library costs can still be slashed without sacrificing publishing margins for electronic product." As I said at the time, "Those stones still have blood in them: You just have to squeeze harder!"

I took a cheap shot at another *First Monday* article, this one discussing the "second-level digital divide," a divide that can *never* be bridged. Namely, some web users search the internet more effectively than other users. What! A crisis! How can we handicap effective searchers?

April 2003: Number 33

Here's an essay I don't think I'd need to write in 2008—the lead PERSPECTIVE, "A Zine is Not a Weblog." Back then, *Cites & Insights* did get labeled as a weblog or blog more than once—and for a bit the idea seemed to be common that blogs were *the* solution to every communications problem.

Even then, some of my best sources were blogs—and "I read several weblogs five times a week." No aggregator, and "several" probably meant 20 or fewer. I recounted discussions regarding blogs, some of them *on* blogs. Ed Felten noted distinctions between blogging and official writing, noting "Blogging works best as a sort of conversation and as an outlet for ideas that aren't big enough or good enough to merit the investment of full-on editing." Felten, a scholar with proper papers to his name, handled and handles *Freedom to tinker* in a manner that's like a blog-based zine, with relatively few posts but long, thoughtful essays in the mix. Steve Bowbrick, writing in *The Guardian*, asserted "The best blogs are written with conversations in mind." At the time, Steven Cohen had changed *Library stuff* from links-with-brief-comments to a more conversational approach focusing on his own thoughts—a change that's since been reversed for the most part. Recognizing when I was either wrong or have changed my mind, I suggested that being able to look at 192 blogs in less than an hour means "about 170 sites too many to draw any coherent conclusions or to actually read, as opposed to glimpse." Little did I know…although, truth is, I *never* read all of every single post in the 500+ blogs I follow. And I

wouldn't even attempt to "draw any coherent conclusions" from scanning all those blogs. Times change. People change. In this case, Jenny Levine (author of the 192-blog statement) was right; I was wrong. David Bigwood of *Catalogablog* wrote a particularly interesting post about blogging and different kinds of reading; I like one comment about blog arrangement as it might or might not suit other requirements: "A book that arranged words by the date of usage would be interesting but not much use as a dictionary."

At the time, I didn't have a blog; *Walt at random* was still two years away. Explaining again why *Cites & Insights* isn't a blog (and in some ways is the opposite of blogging), I noted:

> Could I produce a weblog? Probably. Would it be as good as, say, LISNews, Library Stuff, Scholarly Electronic Publishing weblog, FOS Weblog, Freedom to Tinker, or Catalogablog? Probably not. More to the point, it wouldn't be my style—and it *would* interfere with my writing and thinking. For me, starting a weblog would be a bad thing (I believe) for now. Will I ever produce a weblog? Who knows?

Skimming through the rest of the issue (including a brief BIBS & BLATHER, "The Web is Not the Net," responding to a very silly quotation from a library publication), we get to the heart of the issue: THE FILTERING/CENSORWARE FOLLIES, "CIPA and the Supremes." Sigh. Eleven pages, lots of thought on several sides…interesting history and ultimately futile.

In THE GOOD STUFF, I recommended one of my own columns, noted one writer who believed we were already remembering too much stuff—and pointed to the wonderful anti-phonetic alphabet, with words like cue, irrupt, tsar, ewe, see. Among reader submissions, I was taken with "Q as in quay." (Go look it up, noting that "Quay West" would sound the same.)

December 2003: Number 43

I called this the "Stuff and Nonsense Issue," since it had a *lot* of THE GOOD STUFF and THE LIBRARY STUFF and an essay on "Hysterical Librarians, Attorneys General and Section 215," dealing with John Ashcroft's early take on librarians who weren't enthusiastic about the portion of the USA PATRIOT Act that authorizes FBI searches of records from libraries (and bookstores and businesses). The issue also included fond impressions of the North Carolina Library Association and Charleston Conference.

Remember when Pew wasn't 100% enthusiastic about everything internet? I discussed a report from Pew Internet & American Life, *Spam: How it is hurting email and degrading life on the internet.* It was a good report (with carefully reported statistics). Spam isn't new. I'm not sure whether it's worse (for email) than it used to be. Unfortunately, we know why spam continues: 7% of those polled had actually ordered something from spam email.

Some controversies never go away. Reuters reported on a lawsuit in which four LA residents were suing eight large PC makers because "their advertising deceptively overstates the capacity of their hard drives." It's the old 1,000-vs.-1,024 decimal-vs.-binary issue, and of course the four wanted class-action status. I suggested they weren't going far enough: Not only does the notation system "rob" you of some capacity, but OS makers are even worse—they use storage space *that you paid for* in file allocation overhead, automatic indexing and all sorts of other nefarious deeds. Why, when I got my new notebook, that supposed 250GB hard disk only had 221GB—and I think less than 200GB of that was available. (Gateway allocates an 11.1GB—that is, roughly 12 billion bytes—partition as a recovery drive, leaving 238 billion bytes or 221GB for the primary local disk.) I'm shocked—shocked, you hear me!

Abandoned blogs by the millions are nothing new. A Perseus report said two-thirds of four million hosted weblogs (those on services such as blogspot.com) hadn't been updated in two months—and 25% of blogs "had no postings after the first day." The report said *active* blogs averaged one post every two weeks, with just over 1% of blogs being updated daily. It used the term "nanoaudiences" for the readership of most blogs—but their idea of "nanoaudience" seems to be around 250 people, not a bad readership for a niche blog. One big problem with the study: It was extrapolating from a sample of only 3,634 blogs in a field that's known to be extremely heterogeneous—and extrapolating with absurd levels of precision.

Nor, to be sure, is foolishness about kids and books new. A *Wired* article claimed that students *don't know* there are such things as books—and that the current publishing system made titles "inefficient at thousands of sales per year," only true for the largest publishing houses.

This was also the issue in which I noted Nancy Pearl's rule for books that don't live up to expectations, as she changed the "rule of 50" (read the first 50 pages before abandoning a book) to this modified rule because life is too short:

> If you're over 50, you subtract your age from 100, and that number is the number of pages you have to read.

Thirty-eight pages. I can do that standing up.

August 2004: Number 53

THE READING DISASTER (OR NOT). That was the title of the lead PERSPECTIVE, noting NEA's *Reading at Risk* and attacking the conclusions and the numbers. We were told Johnny *won't* read, the state of books was "grim" and so on—but pay no attention to the man behind the curtain, the one telling us only *literature* counts as reading. Biographies: Not literature. Philosophy: Not literature. History: Not literature. The NEA report came to a remarkable doom-crying conclusion: "At the current rate of loss, literary reading as a leisure activity will virtually disappear in half a century." I see a bull standing out in the field. Now the bull's walking away. And there, on the grass, is this projection.

I was a little amused that *reading* plays is considered proper literary reading—where, presumably, *watching* plays performed wouldn't count. And, as one who remembers that history goes back beyond World War II, I was less than filled with alarm at the idea that less than a majority of adults do Serious Book-length Reading each year (even noting that bodice-rippers and formulaic series fantasy and SF novels *do* count as literature, while Winston Churchill's nonfiction books do not). My conclusion: "The sky has not fallen. I sincerely doubt that America will be a nation of alliterates in 50 years." That conclusion has hardly dissuaded the Chicken Littles.

THE CENSORWARE CHRONICLES devoted several pages to COPA; I get discouraged trying to summarize this stuff. After that, I offered ALA CONFERENCE COMMENTS in one of the first of a series of discussions about conferences and speaking. There followed a fairly long followup on ebooks and library involvement. Again, no summary seems justified.

Back in 2004, I was bothered by a *Wired* comparison of four CD-ripping services—companies serving those too lazy to rip their own CDs to MP3. Partly, I thought the services were silly. More so, I was appalled by *Wired*'s conclusion: "Sure, it costs $135 and up for every 100 discs. But you can flip your newly archived CDs at a record store to pay for it." When you do that—retain a perfect copy and sell the original—it's copyright infringement, pure and simple. I thought it was wrong. I still think it's wrong (yes, I have all the CDs I've ripped). But, as I've noted elsewhere with *PC Magazine*, some print journalists seem strangely uninterested in the ethics of copyright infringement…if it doesn't involve print.

Anyone remember www.teemings.com/extras/lotr/? These days, you get a parking page—but back in 2004, it provided a *huge* number of passages showing what *Lord of the Rings* might be like if someone else had written it. Many were stupid. Quite a few were laugh-out-loud clever.

This was the issue in which, after *twenty years*, I finally stopped doing PC value comparisons. Just as well; they'd be almost useless in more recent years.

May 2005: Number 63

The lead essay was a ©3 PERSPECTIVE: FMA: WATCHING THE WAY YOU WANT. It was unusual for me, as a hard-core free speech/anti-filtering advocate, because I *approved* of a new copyright law that certainly didn't weaken copyright (in general). One part of the bill provided two new criminal offenses—both of which (camcording in a movie theater and infringing on a work while it's being prepared) struck me as almost wholly within the realm of *true* piracy, that is, widespread commercial infringement through sales of bogus DVDs and the like. Two other provisions dealt with preservation.

The odd one was the Family Movie Act. Quoting:

> This act legalizes (in copyright and trademark terms) ClearPlay and similar models, where software or some other control device "mak[es] imperceptible, by or at the direction of a member of a private household…limited portions or audio or video content of a motion picture…from an authorized copy of the motion picture…if no fixed copy of the altered version…is created…" [There's more, but that's the heart.] The act also requires "a clear and conspicuous notice at the beginning of each performance that the performance of the motion picture is altered from the performance intended by the director or copyright holder of the motion picture." In other words, if you buy, rent or borrow a DVD, you have the right to use a ClearPlay-enabled DVD player and instruct it to skip over "the nasty parts," as long as it puts up a "This film has been altered…" screen and doesn't make a permanent modified copy of the movie.

Ed Felten viewed FMA as "an *anti*-censorship proposal," noting that nothing in the act says that portions skipped have to be the naughty bits. Charles W. Bailey, Jr. wondered about artistic integrity and the slippery slope; while I'm sensitive to the latter issue, I don't believe artistic integrity should prevent the purchaser of a *mass-produced copy* from using that copy as they see fit. If I want to skip or rip out annoying chapters in a book I purchased, that's my right—and it's my right to pay someone else to tell me which chapters are annoying. What's *not* my right, and not allowed by FMA: To republish the book without the annoying chapters or to pass the no-annoying-chapters version off as being the whole book (which ClearPlay doesn't do).

I concluded the brief PERSPECTIVE with notes on moral rights—more an issue in Europe than in the U.S.—and my take on how those rights should work:

> What about moral rights? I have mixed feelings, but generally take the "single work or not published vs. reproduced/published work" cut. I believe an artist should have some moral rights over the disposition of a unique work of art. I believe a writer (or whoever) should have complete and total rights over any wholly unpublished work. Once you put it out in public, in reproduced form, things change. I Once I've purchased a copy of your DVD, you have *no* moral right to prevent me from watching it in the manner I prefer. Once you've published a book, you have *no* moral right to keep me from defacing, selling, or otherwise [mis]using it.
>
> If some wacko right-wing operation puts one of these essays into one of their newsletters, with no charge for that newsletter, I *don't* have a moral right to object to that inclusion: I've attached a CC license that settles that issue as a side-effect of settling the copyright permission issues. Heck, my weblog is on at least one blogroll that I'd prefer not to see it on (shudder)—and I don't think I have a moral right to complain about that either.

I'm seeing ClearPlay DVD players on the market now. And we've started movies where we might have welcomed such players—but usually gave up on them.

That wasn't all for ©3 BALANCING RIGHTS: the same issue includes almost seven pages on various aspects of balance. I'd like to think that the stark opposition I began the essay with is no longer relevant—but I'm afraid it's worse than it was in 2005:

> For some people it's simple.
>
> - If you're a songwriter or RIAA/MPAA member with the attitude that creative works are property, the only rights at issue are yours as the property owner. You should be able to control every use and copy made of your property, charge whatever you want, and prevent any use you deem inappropriate—and your heirs should have the same rights in perpetuity.
> - If you're a digital-rights extremist, the fact that copying most "intellectual property" doesn't modify or eliminate the original property means copyright is irrelevant. If something *can* be copied at no real cost, then it's *appropriate* to copy and reuse it.

My personal take is pretty much the same in 2008 as it was in 2005:

> I have no ideal solution for the balance of rights. I'm not sure anyone does. As a creator of sorts, I understand that distribution is a great publicity tool—that I benefit from a certain amount of unintentional distribution, as long as it doesn't swamp the paid, legitimate distribution. But that's not the same as saying that all copying should be legitimate.

Another essay focused on weblogging ethics and impact, long before the Bloggers Code brouhaha. Since I'd just started *Walt at Random*, I was paying closer attention to some of these issues. Remember the Marqui experiment of paying bloggers to mention the company (assuming they'd mention it was for pay)—or more recent (and ongoing) situations where companies pay for blog posts and *don't* expect the pay to be mentioned? My sense then and now is that transparency is the issue: Posts-for-pay are unethical if not disclosed, but pose no ethical issues if done transparently. Even then I thought some people could be a little too tough on ethical standards:

> The next example strikes me as naïve: Om Malik criticizing a bunch of Silicon Valley "influentials" for being offered free products or services "to tout or not tout as they please." Malik believes that after you write about a product "you ship it back." I must say that, when I was reviewing CD-ROMs, it never occurred to me to send them back to the publishers—any more than it would occur to a book reviewer to ship the book back to the publisher. If that makes me unethical, so be it. I appreciate the fact that *Consumer Reports* buys everything it tests and that *Condé Nast Traveler* doesn't accept free travel—but I recognize that those are exceptions.

Most of that essay dealt with Jon Garfunkel's cluster of posts on ethics and impact. If you're interested, read the original and look at Garfunkel's *Civilities* posts; it's too much to summarize.

February 2006: Number 73

What do you do right after a landmark issue that, unbeknownst to you, will reach more people than anything you've ever written? How about a reasonably concise (22 pages) and unthemed issue, with only one longish essay?

The long essay was ©4: LOCKING DOWN TECHNOLOGY—ANALOG HOLE AND BROADCAST FLAG. It covered events in one of the most astonishing ongoing copyright stories, one where Big Media explicitly took one stance during negotiations that resulted in DMCA, and now wants to reverse that stance for its own gain.

The stance: That DMCA's heavy-handed approach to fair use and other copyright limitations was OK because of the "analog hole"—the fact that you could always make an analog copy of whatever digital resource is protected by DRM. That was also a selling point for the Broadcast Flag, with its intent of *preventing* digital recordings (or passthrough of recordings) for some broadcast programs, even though broadcasting involves free use of the public airwaves.

Attempts to shut the analog hole are not only hypocritical, they would involve a huge new involve-

ment of the FCC or FCC-approved agencies in controlling the design and implementation of *many* (maybe most) digital devices, certainly including all computers, smart phones, digital music and video players and storage systems.

I'm tempted to repeat a lengthy quotation from Danny O'Brien, but that's also too long. It's decidedly worth reading, particularly since MPAA and other Big Media haven't given up on efforts to close the analog hole. I will quote part of O'Brien's comments, as appropriate now as in 2005, noting that the original set of quotes occupies a full page in *C&I*:

> Here's what the proposed law says, in a nutshell:
>
> Every consumer analog video input device manufactured in the United States will be, within a year, forced to obey not one, but two new copy restriction technologies…
>
> And what might these MPAA-specified, government-mandated technologies do?
>
> They prescribe how many times (if at all) the analog video signal might be copied—and enforce it. This is the future world that was accidentally triggered for TiVo users a few months ago, when viewers found themselves lectured by their own PVR that their recorded programs would be deleted after a few days.
>
> But it won't just be your TiVo: anything that brings analog video into the digital world will be shackled. Forget about buying a VCR with an un-DRMed digital output. Forget about getting a TV card for your computer that will willingly spit out an open, clear format.
>
> Forget, realistically, that your computer will ever be under your control again. To allow any high-res digitization to take place at all, a new graveyard of digital content will have to [be] built within your PC…
>
> The unprotected analog outputs of computers will be, in perpetuity, restricted to either DRM-laden standards, or to a "constrained image," "no more than 350,000 pixels." Analog video which has been branded as "do not copy," will last for only ninety minutes only in the digital world—and will be erased, literally frame by frame, megabyte by megabyte, from your PC, without your control. You'll watch a two hour film, and as you watch the final half hour, the first few scenes will be being dissolved away by statute…
>
> Oh, and don't think you can just obey the law as it stands now: if the…technologies prescribed by the law become "materially ineffective," then the government can upgrade those standards, and demand compliance on the new spec.
>
> The trustworthy, well-funded technological powerhouse they've chosen to give this new responsibility of monitoring, designing, and managing the upgrading of every video converter in the United States? That uncontroversial institution, the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office…

Elsewhere, I was creeped out by *PC Magazine*'s description of programmable dermal displays—embedded data screens visible on the back of your (not my!) hand, monitoring the "billions of… nanobots monitoring vital signs…throughout the body." I also noted a *PC Magazine* group review of community-oriented social sites that gave highest marks to Clipmarks and Yahoo! My Web 2.0—and lowest marks to del.icio.us, "a cluttered mess…[that] we don't find…particularly palatable."

Another, briefer copyright-related essay was on the commons: WHAT NC MEANS TO ME. It springs from an article finding the Creative Commons "NC" (NonCommercial) clause harmful because it could interfere with some "free content" aims. I found the analysis unconvincing and portions simply incomprehensible. I noted questions that need to be answered when using NC content or considering the license—and added my own interpretation of "Allowable 'NonCommercial' Uses," binding for all original material in *Cites & Insights* or *Walt at Random*. That interpretation is available at waltcrawford.name/ncinterp.htm and citesandinsights.info/ncinterp.htm and there's a link on the *C&I* home page, so I won't quote it here.

I'd just started MY BACK PAGES, but two classics are worth noting or repeating here:

Digital Preservation Paradox

> Paraphrasing a great post from my [former] colleague Merrilee Proffit at *hangingtogether* (December 9, 2005): What if you don't see how digital items can be preserved in a useful form—and what if you write about that a lot, mostly in digital form (naturally).
>
> If you're right, no one will know: The work will disappear.
>
> If you're wrong, "your wrong predictions will mock you from every digital repository and web archive."
>
> As Merrilee notes, there's a gotcha: Chances are, your mostly-digital skepticism will be printed out and filed or someone will refer to it in a print publication. Still, it's an interesting quandary.
>
> Me? I have no doubt many digital items will be preserved successfully—and that many more won't be. That may be a good thing. It may not.

All Those Toolbars

> John Donahe has a great letter in the November 22, 2005 *PC Magazine*, noting that after subscribing to three computer magazines and several newsletters for some years, he's now solved all but two problems with his computer. He now has all the "must-have" software and "can't-live-without" toolbars and sidebars suggested in those publications.
>
> > Now, my only two remaining problems are: (1) I had to uninstall all my applications on the hard drive to make room for utilities software; and (2) the workable size of my monitor screen is now 3 ½ by 2 inches.

How many toolbars are in your browser window? How much room does that leave for content?

November 2006: Number 83

Two major articles, one on *Wikipedia*, one on tracking high-def discs. The first covered a lot of territory related to *Wikipedia*, including that odd *Nature* comparison of *Wikipedia* and *Britannnica*, danah boyd's trouble with *Wikipedia* and similar problems with other living personalities (*Wikipedia* has since changed its policies), a long balanced *New Yorker* article and an unbalanced *Atlantic Monthly* piece where the author approves of the notion that two and two *do* equal five if "the community" says so.

The second followdc an earlier "what you need to know now" piece and noted that most libraries still didn't really need to do anything about HD DVD or Blu-ray. I suggested high-def discs wouldn't matter in 2007 and *might* become a "significant niche medium" in 2008; I still think that's right. After discussing coverage of the two formats and other issues, and expressing my belief that the "heavenly jukebox" (the death of physical DVDs, regardless of definition) was a flawed notion, I continued to believe that "Blu-ray is the likely winner." No prescience here—just a simple reading of the real-world factors at play. I was right—and it wasn't a difficult call to make.

August 2007: Number 93

The "On" issue—all PERSPECTIVES, with four of five not requiring section sublabels.

It's an issue I'm proud of—and one that doesn't bear summarizing, since each essay was thoughtwritten as an essay. The first one became part of a serious ongoing discussion on the professional literature. I believe they are all worth revisiting.

Here's the title and first few paragraphs for each "On" essay. Or, heck, just reread the whole issue; it might make good plane reading for ALA Annual.

On the Literature

> I believe that gray literature—blogs, this ejournal, a few similar publications and some lists—represents the most compelling and worthwhile literature in the library field today.
>
> To a great extent, the formal literature now serves as history, explication, formal results of formal research studies and background; the action is in the informal literature.

On Authority, Worth and Linkbaiting

> Yes, it's the dreaded Britannica Blog essay. Yes, I'm late to the game. No, this is not primarily about Michael Gorman, although his blogging (*his blogging!*) plays a crucial role in the discussion. There will be no fisking here, tempting though it might be—either of Gorman's posts or of some over-the-top responses.
>
> This is a scattered essay. We begin with blog posts from an anti-blogger that really don't address the asserted topic and go from there. I bring biases to the discussion, to be sure:
>
> If authority and worth require advanced degrees and credentials, then what to make of my 15 books and several hundred articles, given my complete lack of advanced degrees and credentials?...

On Disagreement and Discussion

> Are librarians willing to disagree with one another?
>
> What a silly question. Of course we are (I'm counting myself as a librarian for this discussion). Consider some disagreements I've chronicled and taken part in here and in my blog, just for starters….
>
> Are librarians sufficiently forthright in their discussions and disagreements? Can we disagree without being disagreeable? Can we—*do we*—debate and discuss positions without viciousness, toxicity, *ad hominem* and attempts to foreclose effective disagreement?
>
> I think the answer is still yes, at least some of the time, but it's a more complicated answer.

On Ethics and Transparency

> How much do you need to know about who I am and how I deal with issues, people and organizations that might relate to my writing? What do you need to know about my ethical standards? How much disclosure assures adequate transparency?
>
> I'm moved to write about those issues based on three blog posts and reactions to them…

That's an odd but reasonable closing point for this set of retrospectives.

My Back Pages
High-def—like DVD

I gave *Sound & Vision*'s "Gadget Gary" columnist a little flack in the February *Cites & Insights* (for reviewing surround-sound headphones and never mentioning surround-sound aspects), but now I'm impressed by the technological knowledge of this guy, who presumably gets good money for his columns. In the editor-in-chief's column for February/March 2008, there's a sidebar in which the editor-in-chief asked Gary Dell'Abate what the most significant piece of gear of the past 50 years is for him. The first two sentences of the response:

> If I had to choose one gadget that has genuinely changed my life, it would have to be TiVo. It took the ability to record anything (like a VCR) in high-def quality (like the DVD).

Uh, Gary? DVDs aren't high-def. There have been VCRs that could record very nearly DVD-quality video for a long time, namely SVHS. I should know: We've always used SVHS, one reason we haven't yet moved to a DVR. *Some* TiVo models can record HDTV.

As for easy high-quality video recording being genuinely life-changing and the most important "piece of gear" in the last half century—well, who am I to say what matters in life?

The High and the Low

A while back, I noted the price extremes for what *The Abso!ute Sound* considers serious, high-end audio gear. At that point, it took some digging to put together combinations, but it's gotten easier: A recurring feature, "The TAS short list," names the magazine's favorite products in every price category. These aren't just acceptable—these are *favorites*. The list doesn't include any "if you have to ask" devices such as $100,000 turntables or $250,000 speaker systems.

Based on the February 2008 edition, let's put together two stereo systems—both for CDs, not LPs.

- **System 1**: Oppo DV-981HD universal CD player (which also plays SACD and DVD-Audio discs). Cambridge Audio Azur 540A v2 receiver (60wpc). PSB Alpha B1 speakers. Kimber Cable 8TC cable/Hero interconnect (speaker cables and CD-receiver interconnect). **Total price: $1,400**.
- **System 2**: MBL 1621A CD-transport/1611 E DAC. (Not a universal player). MBL 6010D preamp and 9011 monoblock amplifier. MBL 101E speakers. MIT Magnum MA cable and Oracle Magnum interconnect. **Total price: Roughly $220,000** (unless the amplifier price is for one, in which case it's around $300,000).

Is the $220,000 system better than the $1,400 system? I'm sure it is. Is it 157 times as good? That's a matter of individual taste. Combine diminishing returns, your own ears and the possibility that very high-end audio equipment may be more about rarity and price than objective quality.

"We Really Do Not Own Any of the Content We Consume"

So says *PC Magazine*'s editor-in-chief. "We access or play an instance of it, but ownership really lies with the creators or, if they've signed the rights away, with the media conglomerate that sold the right to consume it—on a limited basis—to you."

Bull. Maybe "The digitization of everything" as a done deed earlier in the same paragraph should be a clue that Ulanoff's off in some other universe. (He's moaning about what a *bad thing* DRM-free music is!)

Technically, it's true. When you buy a book or CD, you don't own the *content*: You don't have the right to duplicate it as often as you'd like and sell it as your own. But you do **own** one copy of the content as instantiated in the physical object you *purchased*. You have absolute rights to give it away, lend it to someone, sell it, destroy it. No "limited basis" other than the same limited basis that exists for most any other manufactured object: If I buy a Honda Civic, that doesn't give the right to manufacture my own copies of the car and sell them, but it gives me absolute ownership and first-sale rights over that copy.

Obscure Four-Letter Words?

I'm seeing a term used repeatedly in audio magazines to describe certain speakers that aren't circular, but rather are wider than they are tall (or vice-versa). The word is "racetrack-shaped."

I wouldn't assume everyone's familiar with the shape of a racetrack—or, for that matter, that all racetracks are shaped the same. And there is a four-letter word that describes these speakers, one I alwys thought was fairly familiar: Oval.

Is "oval" so obscure that we need a sixteen-character hyphenation instead?

The Last Audio Man on Earth

Ken C. Pohlmann of *Sound & Vision* is rapidly gaining the exalted status of John Dvorak: Too easy a target. He enhances that position with his April 2008 column, "I am audio legend," subtitled "Surrounded by screens at CES, I felt like the last audio man on earth."

He bemoans the fact that the Consumer Electronics Show seemed mostly devoted to television. He goes on a rant about how watching TV "sucks away your soul" while music (any music?) is "emotional, active, liberating, visceral, enlightening." He's clear about this: "Video is passive propaganda" where "Music…provokes a response." "Video is conformist; music is insurgent."

Got it. Britney Spears: Good. *Masterpiece Theater*: Soul-sucking crap. The Monkees: Enlightening. *Arrested Development*: Passive propaganda.

> Consider: Your apartment neighbor mounts a big TV on the common wall and watches it all night with the brightness cranked all the way up. Your other neighbor listens to music all night with the volume cranked all the way up. Which one would you call the police on?

Since the first example is (a) highly unlikely and (b) allows you to avoid the TV simply by being in your

own apartment, I know my answer—and it has to do with intrusion. He actually *urges* people to "listen to more music—preferably through speakers, and preferably in public. That's because your music will rouse and possibly *upset* other people." **The boombox manifesto:** Noise pollution as a civic good. Wonderful.

In addition to this steaming pile of argumentation, he simply *ignores* the fact that there was enough audio at CES to make for huge reports in high-end magazines. He says "Audio is persona non grata"—and that just ain't so. The audio manufacturers were mostly in different areas, and it appears that Pohlmann either ignored those areas or chose to exclude them as not playing to his worldview.

Early on in the column he makes this statement:

> Consider your own home. There's a good chance that your wall screen is bigger than any of your windows. When windows looking into artificial reality eclipse the ones looking out to actual reality, that isn't good.

First off, you'd have to compare the single wall screen to *all* of the windows on the most window-populated wall in a house; after all, if you're looking in one direction, you see through all the windows. Given that, I wonder just how "good" that chance actually is. In our tiny little California rancher, we'd need an 18-foot diagonal screen to match the largest window—and about a 30-foot diagonal screen to match the glass on the most prominent wall. I can pretty well guarantee that we're not going to have anything more than, say, a 5-foot diagonal screen in any near future.

Numeracy Reigns Supreme

That same April 2008 *Sound & Vision* includes a CES report—all about video, naturally, since this mag seems unaware of the audio-exhibit spaces. One segment struck me as remarkable in its simplicity:

> While the Panasonic set boasted 4,096 x 2,160 pixel (4K) resolution, Samsung and Sony both displayed ultra-high-resolution 82-inch LCD sets boasting more than 8 million pixels!

Hmm. When I multiply 4,096 times 2,160, I get roughly 8.85 million pixels—which, last time I checked, was more than 8 million pixels. I must be missing something…

Products "We Can't Do Without"

Another barrel filled with fish. But nobody *requires* magazines to run features on "the top 25 products that we don't just like but that we absolutely, positively can't live without." That's strong language, taken directly from the lead paragraph in the March 2008 *PC World*. What is so essential you'd *die* without it?

TiVo. Belkin's N1 Vision wireless router. Skype. Microsoft FolderShare. Quicken Premier 2008. RoboForm. OKBridge, "an online bridge community." The iPhone, of course—but also the Fujitsu LifeBook P7010D. MS Word 2003. Google Sky. Logitech's Harmony 670 Advanced Universal Remote. My Yahoo. OpenOffice 2.3. And more…

I'm with Scott Spanbauer (this essay is 25 mini-essays featuring one essential-to-life product for each of 25 staffers): **"(Nothing)"** He adds (in part):

> I've never met a product I couldn't do without, and that's the way it should be.

Me too.

Everyone Has…

I don't know why I even bother pointing out absurd universalisms—but some are more absurd than others. Take the "Beta Watch" column by Edward N. Albro in the May 2008 *PC World*. Here's the first sentence (emphasis added):

> **Everyone has a few PCs they use regularly**, and keeping the latest versions of important files current on all of them can be a major hassle.

Everyone. I think of "a few" as implying "more than two," but maybe not. Still…just at a guess, there might be at least five or ten people in the U.S. who don't have even *two* PCs they "use regularly." There are two of those people in my household, just for starters. I guess if you're retired, unemployed, or otherwise lacking the minimal necessities of a work PC, a home PC, and probably a notebook to use between the two—then you're nobody, at least for *PC World*.

Masthead

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