*Cites & Insights

Crawford at Large

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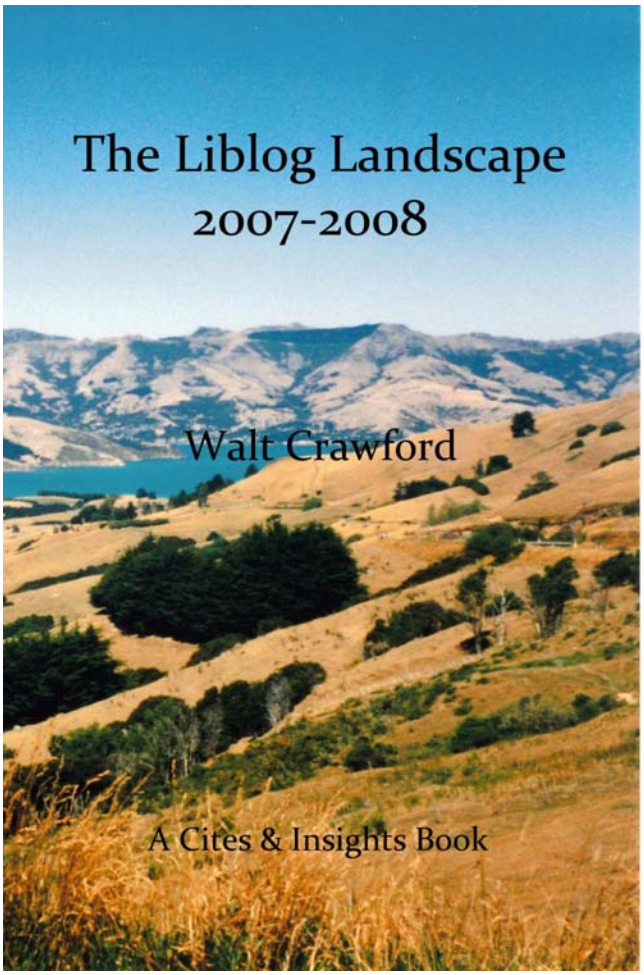
Volume 9, Number 1: January 2009 ISSN 1534-0937 Walt Crawford

Bibs & Blather

The Liblog Landscape 2007-2008



The Liblog Landscape 2007-2008: A Lateral Look is now available from Lulu and CreateSpace/Amazon. The 285-page 6x9 trade paperback costs $35.00. If you're reading this before January 15, 2009, you can take advantage of the early bird special: Order directly from lulu.com (www.lulu.com/content/4898086) for $22.50 plus shipping. The ISBN13 for the CreateSpace/Amazon version is 978-1440473845.

The Liblog Landscape 2007-2008 looks at 607 liblogs (most English-language) and, for most of them, how they've changed from 2007 to 2008. Eleven chapters consider the universe of liblogs (blogs by "library people" as opposed to blogs from libraries):

- Age, authorship, country of origin
- Number of posts during a three-month period and change from 2007 to 2008
- Word count and average post length; change
- Comments and comments per post; change
- Figures and figures per post; change
- Patterns of change from 2007 to 2008
- Correlations between pairs of metrics
- A look at 143 blogs from 2006 through 2008
- Interesting subgroups
- The visibility issue
- Liblogs and the larger blogosphere

The final chapter, just over half the book, provides a brief objective description and metrics for each blog. The book includes many tables and a fair number of graphs. There is an index of blogs and authors.

Inside This Issue

It's the most comprehensive look at liblogs ever done—and the only one I know of that shows how they're changing from year to year.

Chapter by Chapter

If you've been reading the series of posts on *Walt at Random*, you can skip this part—it's the same text, but without the puzzles and segments of the list of liblogs.

Chapter 1: The Liblog Landscape

The first chapter introduces naïve hypotheses on liblogs and how they're changing (I was right and

wrong), "typical" liblogs (there's no such thing), metrics and quintiles used in the book, how I assembled the universe of liblogs—and some descriptive elements for the 607 blogs.

Descriptive elements? Things that aren't part of the regular metrics but may be worth noting. What blog programs do bloggers use? (The top two are closer together than I would have thought.) How many bloggers provide full names–and how many group blogs are there? What about typography? How are liblog distributed by affiliation? By country? By age?

One graphical note: Two figures show precisely the same data–the age of blogs within the study–but one is difficult to interpret while the other is crystal-clear. The difference? One graphs age by month, the other by year. (The peak year for new liblogs was 2005–not 2006, which is what I expected to find.)

Chapter 2: How Many Posts?

Chapter 2 considers frequency—the number of posts in a blog and how that frequency changed from 2007 to 2008. As with most other metrics in this book, the analysis and comments are based on March, April and May 2007 and 2008.

The most prolific blog had 200 fewer posts in 2008 than the most prolific blog did in 2007, and there were fewer posts for 533 countable blogs in 2008 than for 523 countable blogs in 2007, even though more blogs were involved.

Indeed, of 523 blogs with countable posts for 2007, slightly more than 60% had at least 20% fewer posts in 2008–but slightly more than 20% had at least 20% more posts in 2008.

Chapter 3: How Long?

Chapter 3 deals with word count—for blogs over a three-month period and, more interesting, as average word counts per post within a blog. With overall lengths ranging from 26 words to 186,467 words in 2007—and from 39 to 204,517 in 2008!—there's quite a range.

There's no "right length" for a blog post. Some excellent blogs have very short posts; others consist entirely of long essays. This is one metric where both the longest and shortest posts stand out as unusual in positive, interesting ways. The chapter includes tables, charts comparing one year to another and considerable discussion.

Some of you can probably already guess the blog with the shortest average words per post; it's also one of relatively few blogs with exactly the same number of posts in March-May 2007 and March-May 2008: 92, to be exact. See page 35.

Chapter 4: Conversations

Is a blog without comments really a blog? Of course it is–but comments are important to many, maybe most liblogs. This chapter looks at total comments per blog and the more interesting figure, conversational intensity: Average number of comments per post. We also look at how things change from 2007 to 2008.

One blog in 2007 had more than 1,000 (and more than 1,500) comments over three months. Two entirely different blogs had more than 1,000 (but less than 1,300) comments in the 2008 study period. And roughly two out of every five blogs had significantly *higher* conversational intensity in 2008 than in 2007.

There's lots more about comments and conversational intensity in the book.

Chapter 5: Getting the Picture

Chapter 5 is about visuals in liblogs—videos, drawings, charts, etc.. Many blogs don't use them at all; many use very few. This is one metric that won't be tracked in possible future updates, but I think you may find the brief chapter interesting.

Speaking of visuals, you should know that the wraparound cover photo was taken (by my wife, the talented one in the family) somewhere outside Christchurch, New Zealand.

Chapter 6: Patterns of Change

By my lights, this is one of the most interesting chapters, one that combines facets of blogs to look at patterns. I look at change in number of posts, change in average post length and change in comments per post.

The chapter uses two models to describe change: A simple "up or down" model and one splitting metrics into three parts: Significant increase (20% or more), significant decrease (-20% or more) and "about the same" (+19% to -19%).

I think you'll find this an interesting and possibly revealing chapter. It's also the chapter that convinces me that my naïve hypotheses are right in some ways, wrong in others…which can be said of almost any hypothesis regarding the overall liblog landscape!

Chapter 7: Correlations

When I was working on this study, colleagues offered suggestions on possible correlations–e.g., older liblogs might show larger decreases in posts than newer ones.

This chapter looks at a few dozen possible correlations between pairs of metrics, normalizing metrics and using Excel's CORREL function (which appears to be identical to the PEARSON function, calculating Pearson's product-moment coefficient, the only readily available measure of correlation between two sets of numbers that I could find).

For those cases where the correlation is medium (between 0.3 and 0.5 or -0.3 and -0.5) or strong (greater than 0.5 or less than -0.5), I note the correlation and include a scatterplot for the two values.

Statistical extremists sometimes discuss weak correlations—those below 0.3. Fact is, almost any two sets of numbers will show some correlation (that is, will have a Pearson's product-moment coefficient greater or less than 0.000)—but I see no reason to believe that weak correlations mean anything at all, other than that you're comparing two sets of numbers. I do note some weak correlations, mostly to say there's no significant correlation between the two metrics.

As to the age suggestion? I found no useful correlation between age of blogs and any other metric.

A couple of notes about figures in this book

The Liblog Landscape 2007-2008 includes quite a few line graphs and a few scatterplots. I used Excel2007's graphing functions and tuned the results for legibility. Most graphs and plots represent more than 400 data points. The only graphs and plots that use non-zero baselines are those dealing with change percentages, where the baseline is properly -100%.

Purists may object that the graphs and plots are chartjunk for either of two reasons:

- In most cases, the axes–while showing numbers–aren't labeled (there are no words below or to the side of the axes).
- In some cases, one or both axes are logarithmic rather than linear.

I believe logarithmic axes are chartjunk only if there are no numbers on the axis. When you see evenly-spaced marks numbered "1 10 100 1,000" you're dealing with a logarithmic axis–and I don't believe that's deceptive. Some sets of data simply require logarithmic charting to display meaningfully, and some data is logarithmic in character. For example, nearly all audio performance graphs are logarithmic in most scales–frequency, distortion percentage, power–simply because sound has logarithmic characteristics.

The first one's simple enough. In most cases, it didn't make sense to label the horizontal axis but not the vertical axis, and there's a clear issue with labeling the vertical axis. That issue could be stated as "26 picas" or "4 1/3 inches." Either way, it's the width available between the margins of a typical 6×9" book: The width of the text block. Make that block wider, and you either have problems with the binding margin or have too-narrow outer margins.

26 picas is a nearly ideal width for 11point or 12point text, within the 55- to 65-character range usually regarded as optimal for reading. But it's a little narrow for a graph with a lot of information…particularly after you add numeric labels for the vertical axis and a little white space between the graph and border. That narrows the graph area to at most four inches and more typically around 3.5 inches.

What happens when you add a vertical axis label? You lose another half-inch or more.

I found that graphs were squeezed too tight as a result–they became even harder to interpret.

In the end, I eliminated most axis labels, stating them in the text that precedes or follows each graph instead. It was a tradeoff of proper graph presentation standards versus graph readability. (The other alternative–8.5×11" for the book, with a 6" text block–is great for graphs but problematic for everything else.)

Chapter 8: The 2006-2008 Landscape

The last time I looked at a large number of liblogs was in the summer of 2006, considering 213 liblogs that seemed to be in "the great middle"–neither the most visible nor the least visible in the field.

This chapter looks at 143 of those blogs: Ones with at least two posts in each of the three March-May study periods. It's a longer lateral study of a much smaller landscape–and a landscape that I don't regard as necessarily typical of liblogs as a whole.

I believe there's a significant conclusion from the subgroup, and that conclusion appears in the chapter–but it's less firm than I'd like to be, because the group may not be representative.

Chapter 9: Subgroups

Do pseudonymous/anonymous blogs differ significantly from the liblog landscape as a whole? What about Canadian blogs—or blawgs?

Chapter 9 takes a dozen groups of blogs, including most groups with at least 15 blogs, and offers brief notes on how they differ (quantitatively) from the entire study. It's a short chapter (including a dozen figures and notes on each figure) and an interesting one.

Chapter 10: Visibility

Many blogging gurus (mostly outside the library arena) would say visibility is the most important thing for a blog—how many readers, how many ad impressions, how many links? In previous studies, I've looked at it as an interesting factor—but also one that's hard to judge externally.

This chapter discusses how I've looked at visibility in the past, what I did this time (and why it was only used as a lower limit for inclusion, not as an actual metric), why it's getting even more difficult—and what I'll do in future studies (if any).

Chapter 11: Liblogs and the Larger Blogosphere
This chapter looks at the 2008 Technorati *State of the Blogosphere* report and draws some comparisons between the liblog landscape and the larger blogosphere. Portions have appeared elsewhere.

Chapter 12: Liblog Profiles
This chapter offers a brief objective view of each liblog: Name (using the orthography of the blog itself), motto or subtitle if any, author, affiliation, country, start date, up to three of the most popular categories or tags (if obvious), and a set of metrics.

Why there's not more personal commentary
At least a couple of you have said you were looking forward to my comments about blogs—and I'm afraid you'll be disappointed.

The book includes lots of comments about how liblogs work in the aggregate and how they're changing. The first 11 chapters are very much in my voice and include my opinions.

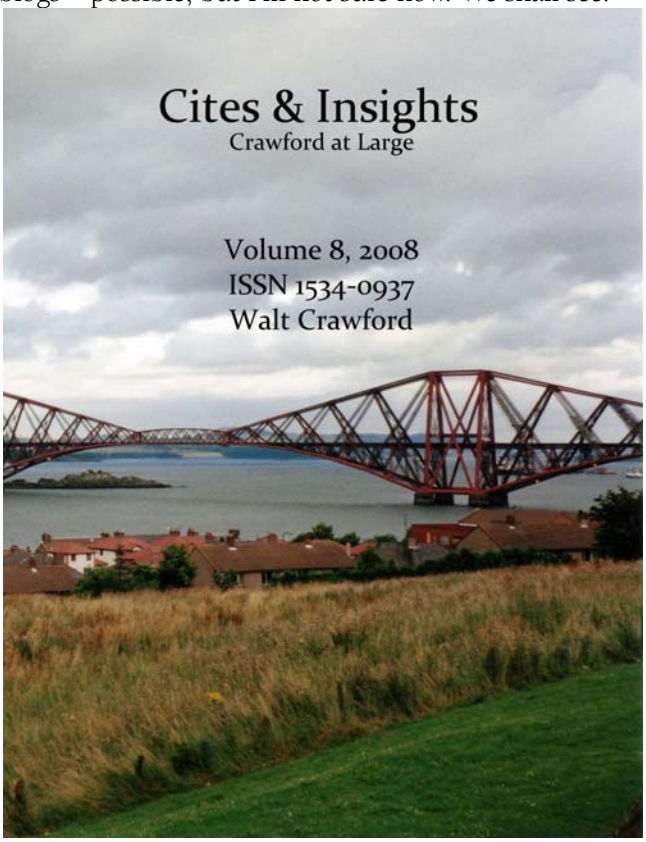
But I don't attempt to discuss what bloggers are posting *about*—that's too complicated and too transitory. To be honest, with some of the more prolific blogs, I was just marking-and-counting: Adding up the number of posts, comments and figures, and measuring total word count, but not reading each post. (Hey, the blogs included more than 22,000 posts during March-May 2007 and more than 19,000 during March-May 2008. I'm a fast reader, but that's a *lot* of reading—more than 9.5 million words, or the equivalent of at least 95 good-size books.)

As I was building the preliminary version of Chapter 12, I was adding a brief evaluative comment for each blog in some cases: One or two sentences describing the blog's nature as I saw it during the 2008 period. I wound up stripping out all of those comments for four reasons:

1. In a few cases (maybe half a dozen?), I didn't feel I could include a comment because I really didn't like the blog (or some aspects of the blog, or the blogger)—and I'd already decided to follow the "grandmother rule" (If I couldn't say anything nice, I wouldn't say anything at all.)
2. In a *lot* of cases (scores of them), I didn't have anything useful to say, either because the blog was in an area I don't understand very well or for other reasons.
3. As I worked my way through, I found my comments becoming less and less useful.
4. **The killer**: Those comments would take up at least 100 pages of the book, probably more like 150 pages. I was hoping to keep the book under 300 pages (and succeeded, partly by using slightly smaller type) and certainly wanted to keep it under 400 pages.

Part of me wants to do the evaluative part—but I think it would be a separate book. Is that book worth doing? Am I the right one to do it? (Would I be able to keep on as even a part-time participant in the library field after doing it?)

Damned if I know. For now, I'm not sure how I'd go about it. The task of categorizing and judging 19,000 posts is far beyond me, I think. The task of providing useful evaluative comments on 500 or more blogs—possible, but I'm not sure how. We shall see.



Cites & Insights Volume 8

Cites & Insights 8 (2008) is also available as a trade paperback, this one 8.5x11" and 346 pages long. All twelve issues of *Cites & Insights* 8 appear, plus the volume title sheet and indexes.

I'm assuming that the only likely customers for the bound volumes of *C&I* are people who want to show support for my ongoing work. I produced the volume primarily as a good way to have my *own* bound copy. Given that assumption, I'm pricing Volume 8 (and repricing Volumes 6 and 7) at $50. If you want to show support but have no interest in a big thick book with a really nice cover, taken in Scotland, I'm making the PDF download available for the same price.

The books will be available until June 2009 or two months past the last order received for any of them, whichever comes later.

C&I in book form is *only* available through Lulu. Volume 8 is at http://www.lulu.com/content/5014958; change "5014958" to "1526643" for Volume 7 (2007) and to "1738303" for Volume 6 (2006).

Other Books

In the November 2008 *Cites & Insights* I said that *Public Library Blogs: 252 Examples* and *Academic Library Blogs: 231 Examples* would be going out of print around the beginning of 2009, given no sales of the first book since June 2008 and only two sales of the second book since June 2008.

I won't say there's been much change since then, but the picture has muddied. Here's my current plan for changes, as soon on or after January 1, 2009 as I get around to them:

- The *print* versions at Lulu.com will be disabled—but the downloadable versions will still be available for $20.00. I'll keep those available until at least two months go by with no sales at all.
- Print versions at CreateSpace (www.createspace.com/3330831 for *Public Library Blogs* and www.createspace.com/3333993 for *Academic Library Blogs)* will be available at least for a little while. You can get a 20% discount by entering the discount code KMM7J427 for the first and BABJDZAD for the second when you checkout. I believe the Amazon conduit for the CreateSpace versions will be disabled, but I might be wrong. I'll also keep those available until two months go by with no sales at all.
- *Balanced Libraries: Thoughts on Continuity and Change* continues to be available (and to sell, albeit *very* slowly). I'll probably keep it in print until I decide whether to do a second edition.

A Little Start-of-Volume Blather

One element of the Word2007 template for *Cites & Insights* changes with this issue. I believe most of you will find that it makes portions a little easier to read. It may also make some issues a little longer. The first person to send me email or otherwise note *what* the change is will earn my hearty congratulations.

So far, no major changes are planned for this volume. ("Planned": what an interesting word.)

Yes, this issue is peculiar—maybe more peculiar than usual. That has to do with scheduling—wanting to get done with the RETROSPECTIVE series during the calendar year (albeit not by formal publication date) and paying attention to the desires of some readers. Yes, I could deep-six the OFFTOPIC PERSPECTIVE—but there's no MY BACK PAGES and I need to have *some* fun.

Net Media

Wikipedia Notes

It's been a while since we discussed *Wikipedia*, its competitors and structure. I had four clusters of wiki-related items to discuss—items about *Wikipedia* itself, Wikia Search and other Wikia stuff, Knol and Citizendium. Now that I've gone through *Wikipedia* items, I see the rest will have to wait (and Knol might or might not be worth discussing in a few more months).

My Own Bias

Here's a brief version of how I feel about *Wikipedia*.

- I use *Wikipedia* without hesitation for most pop culture, geographic/statistical, current technology and trivia questions—and frequently as a starting point for other queries.
- I do *not* trust *Wikipedia* to have consistently fair, objective or neutral-viewpoint articles because I know better, and know enough about some subjects to verify my doubts.
- I do *not* believe *Wikipedia* essays inherently get better and better because of more and more edits. I don't believe *Wikipedia* articles generally come close to the quality of signed essays by experts. I believe the *Wikipedia* methodology pushes against the kind of narrative flow and polish seen in really good introductory essays, except when the topic's obscure enough to avoid edit wars and other *Wikipedia* phenomena.
- I believe *Wikipedia* is a remarkable combined effort—but I do *not* believe it's a model for hundreds or thousands of similar efforts. "Crowdsourcing" is a tricky field. Some problems are evident in the sheer amount of axe-grinding in IMDB reviews (for example). The notion that millions (billions?) of hours will be devoted to such efforts that were formerly spent watching TV is absurd on at least two counts: First, it makes the false assumption that people are watching less TV (they're splitting TV time among more channels, but current reports show *more* time spent watching); second, it assumes people will do intellectually challenging work in time formerly spent being a couch potato. *Sure* they will.
- I've made a couple of edits in *Wikipedia*. I don't plan to make many more. Between deletionists, the various levels of edit bureaucrats and the increasingly stifling requirement that Every Single

Fact be Footnoted in a "proper" way—I have better things to do with my limited energy.

- I like Tim Spalding's comment in a July 15, 2008 *Thingology* post. He's describing the oft-edited article on Alexander the Great and says this (my favorite note boldfaced): "[The article], for example, has seen periodic, bitter warfare on national or sexual grounds and, although randomly wonderful, with extensive hyperlinking and some exceptional tidbits, has never grown into a decent summary. It's lumpy, unbalanced, poorly written and poorly sourced—**a bright fourteen year-old child sitting next to you on a bus, telling you everything he knows**. Parts are good. Parts are bad. Parts are just off somehow—their correction requiring un-Wikipedia-esque virtues like restraint, proportionality and style. At one point I watched it closely and made substantial edits. I've moved on. In my opinion, if the Wiki culture and process were going to produce a good article on Alexander, they would have done so already."
- **Now look back at the first bullet**. I do not despise, dislike or disdain *Wikipedia*. I have mixed feelings about Jimbo Wales, but Wales isn't Wikipedia. One advantage of being obscure (outside the library field) is that I *don't* have an entry in *Wikipedia* (at least not in the U.S. edition). I'd just as soon keep it that way.

Verifiability, Not Truth

Start with a comment (noted by Seth Finkelstein in a February 10, 2008 *Infothought* post) from Florence Devouard, chair of the Board of Trustees of the Wikimedia Foundation, parent organization of *Wikipedia*:

> I will not edit the article any more. My concern has been stated: the policy "verifiability, not truth" is stupid.

That requires context. "The article" in question is the "Wikia" article in *Wikipedia*, and this immediate comment is preceded on the discussion page by:

> You have a clear conflict of interest—please refrain from editing the article and rather inform editors of your concerns here.

The dispute has to do with the relationship between Wikia—a for-profit venture-capital-backed startup—and Wikimedia Foundation, a nonprofit. Or, rather, the *lack* of such connection. You'd have to read the page yourself (noting that Devouard's username is "Anthere") but, as Finkelstein notes, the most cogent section is this:

> I'll drop the matter for now, but I feel greatly the frustration of all those who have biographies in Wikipedia about them, when the biography states something hugely false about them, and they can not get the error to be corrected, because the burden of proof relies on them to prove that the editors are wrong. If something kills Wikipedia one day, it will be precisely this. The inability to admit that something is wrong, unless the contrary is mentioned in the mainpress. The press does not care about stating something correct. There will never be a New York *Times* article with headlines such as "Breaking news: Wikia and Wikimedia Foundation are truly separate organizations !" I would be glad that you join the dozen of editors…who need to contact press over and over and over again, to ask them to correct the title saying "Wikipedia launches a search engine." Requesting corrections over and over again is mostly due to the confusion between the two companies, and next time you see such [errors], appreciate you played an active part in the confusion.

The key issue here: By policy, *Wikipedia* prefers "verifiability" (something printed in a "reputable" publication) to the facts—if the facts aren't backed up by "verifiability."

Or does it? Apparently there's an exception, based on this February 13, 2008 addition:

> This is just to let you know that material that's self-published by Wikia e.g. a press release, or a statement on its website, is allowed to be used as a source in the article. The policy allows self-published material that was written by the subject of the article—with some restrictions, which are listed here—and as that part of the article directly concerns the Foundation, a press release from the Foundation would be acceptable too.

There seems to be an edit war on the "Verifiability" page, so I'm loath to claim what it actually says about a person or group's ability to verify their own claims. It's certainly an interesting approach, particularly given the difficulty of demonstrating that a press release was ever used by (or released to) the press: Once you've been mentioned, somehow, in "the press," you can verify whatever you want by issuing your own statements. Did I mention that I'm actually Archduke of Stanislaus County? (Hey, *Cites & Insights* has been mentioned in reputable print publications, disreputable as it may itself be—and I've been mentioned as its editor and publisher.)

As I understand that Talk item, because mainstream press mentioned Wikia, Wikia can now verify whatever facts about itself it wishes—and anyone *disputing* those facts bears the burden of proving such a dispute by citing mainstream media. That sounds semi-plausible for biographical entries of living persons—you *should* be a preferred provider of facts about yourself unless there's evidence countering

those facts—but I'm not so sure about organizations and movements and the like. Should GM or, say, AIG be able to say anything it chooses about itself and have it accepted as fact by *Wikipedia*, while claims that run counter to GM's or AIG's statements have to be backed up by mainstream publications?

Wikipedia's Growing Pains

That's the title on Marcus Banks' March 20, 2008 post at *Marcus' world*, but I could as easily title this section "The charms of Wikipedia"—the title on Nicholson Baker's review of *Wikipedia: The Missing Manual* in the March 20, 2008 *New York Review of Books*. Banks links to Baker, provides a summary and adds his own comments.

Baker's review is charming. Even when he's saying fundamentally unsound things, Baker is a clever writer. Clearly, *Wikipedia* fascinates him and he finds the whole thing rather marvelous. He also offers an interesting extended metaphor for the "deletionist" issue:

> [W]hen people did help they were given a flattering name. They weren't called "Wikipedia's little helpers," they were called "editors." It was like a giant community leaf-raking project in which everyone was called a groundskeeper. Some brought very fancy professional metal rakes, or even back-mounted leaf-blowing systems, and some were just kids thrashing away with the sides of their feet or stuffing handfuls in the pockets of their sweatshirts, but all the leaves they brought to the pile were appreciated. And the pile grew and everyone jumped up and down in it having a wonderful time. And it grew some more, and it became the biggest leaf pile anyone had ever seen anywhere, a world wonder. And then self-promoted leaf-pile guards appeared, doubters and deprecators who would look askance at your proffered handful and shake their heads, saying that your leaves were too crumpled or too slimy or too common, throwing them to the side. And that was too bad. The people who guarded the leaf pile this way were called "deletionists."

At which point, as an old Ken Nordine "Word Jazz" fan, I hear the line "So how are things in your town?" in my mind—but you'd need *way* too much context to make that association work. (The track is "Flibberty jib." You can buy the CD—*The Best of Word Jazz, Volume One*. Nordine is brilliant, in my opinion.)

Working my way back from that digression, there's some entertaining stuff in Baker's *4,700 word* "book review" (that would be six or seven *C&I* pages). (Not to digress again—well, yes, after all, distraction/digression and *Wikipedia* go hand in hand—but that made me wonder how long Nicholson Baker's *own* entry in *Wikipedia* is. Including bibliography and footnotes, around 2,100 words; the article itself, about 1,500 words—including, to be sure, a paragraph on this book review, presumably because it's about a book about *Wikipedia* and *Wikipedia* is nothing if not self-referential.)

Nicholson says *Wikipedia* "worked and grew because it tapped into the heretofore unmarshaled energies of the uncredentialed." He points out that *Wikipedia* "had a head start" because it could, legally, import articles from the 1911 "scholar's edition" of the *Britannica*, now in the public domain—and from a variety of other public domain sources. Baker discusses the addictivity of *Wikipedia* editing—and of staying vigilant lest your work be undone. (As he notes, the easiest way to avoid vandalism—or, for that matter, to insert nonsense into *Wikipedia*—is to go for the obscure.)

I have to admit that Baker's description of some particular edit wars seems to amuse him more than it does me—but he does say "This is a reference book that can suddenly go nasty on you," particularly if you hit it between vandalism and reversal. (He cites the article about James Bryant Conant, which for seventeen minutes consisted of "HES A BIG STUPID HEAD.")

Did I mention this is a book review? About two-thirds of the way through, Baker *mentions the book*. There's a 400-word section relating directly to the book. That out of the way, Baker moves on to his own experience as "Wageless" on *Wikipedia*. He gets involved in a deletion issue regarding a minor poet and starts to turn into a general-purpose anti-deletionist. (By Baker's standards, I should *definitely* be in *Wikipedia*!) He spends a fair amount of text on deletionism, notability purges and all that.

The sad part of reading Baker's article—other than demonstrating the ease with which Baker goes entirely gaga on a subject—is that I *did* look him up on *Wikipedia*, then read about his latest book…and find that any respect I might have had for the man is gone, replaced by a general feeling of revulsion. Nothing to do with his feelings about libraries; a lot to do with that book.

Pulling back one layer, Marcus Banks is also anti-deletionist:

> One man's trash is another man's treasure. There are no page or length restrictions in the Wikipedia (obviously), so who am I to judge what should matter to you?
>
> The healthy side of Wikipedia regulation manifests itself whenever people delete silly or unfactual edits within individual articles… But the mood these days is much more sinister. Baker quotes Andrew Lih: "The

> preference now is for excising, deleting, restricting information rather than letting it sit there and grow."
>
> There is a bright side, thank goodness. Those worried about the Wikipedia censors can join the awkwardly named Wikiproject Proposed Deletion Patrolling project. This is a splinter faction within the Wikipedia community; anyone can resist the notability purges and spur the Wikipedia to hew closer to its original spirit.
>
> To the cyber-barricades, I say—the more articles about Pokemon, the better!

I tend to agree that deleting relatively "unimportant" articles seems a little silly in *Wikipedia* and that the standard for notability for living persons might best be tempered by a general policy that, barring obvious public fame, any living person can request that their biography be removed. Otherwise—well, who's notable? What's notable? *Why* is notability an issue? If *Wikipedia* had a table of contents or index, you could argue that it needs limits—but it doesn't, at least not in any serious sense.

Which leads me to…

The Power of the Wikipedia Editor

This April 17, 2008 post by Michael Pate at *LibraryPlanet.com* makes a strong statement, one that people who celebrate *Wikipedia* should consider. He cites two versions of a *Wikipedia* piece and the revision history. He then quotes a global warming skeptic who is outraged by the edits being made—edits that deprecate (or eliminate) doubts of global warming.

What's happened to the article does seem strange—even stranger if you look at the current version (as of December 3, 2008 at 3:45 p.m. PST), where the whole controversy seems to have disappeared entirely. I am also aware of other cases in which active editors seem to have maintained a singular point of view and managed to justify it as being "NPOV." But it also looks like the person making the complaint is not just a global warming skeptic but a Global Warming Denier—one who claims far more scientific disagreement about global warming than most of the record shows and seems to show up in right-wing periodicals more than elsewhere. (*Wikipedia* doesn't cast lots of doubt on evolution within its "Evolution" article either, I believe appropriately—but it does link from that article to "Evolution as theory and fact," which *does* discuss the "controversy.")

On the other hand, it's hard to argue with Pate's last two paragraphs:

> In this case, it doesn't even matter to me who is wrong or right. What is way more disturbing is the denial that there is any controversy and the systematic manipulation to suppress any mention of it.
>
> As long as Wikipedia is subject to the whim of the individual editors who are willing to not only delete things they disagree with but lock out furthering editing to ensure they retain control, Wikipedia will remain nothing more than a group wiki for a tightly-constrained oligarchy.

But let's go back to August 2007…

Rise of the Wikicrats

That's Nicholas Carr's title for an August 23, 2007 post at *Rough type* with this first paragraph:

> It's over. The Deletionists won.

Carr cites Andrew Lih's July 10, 2007 post "Unwanted: New articles in Wikipedia" (www.andrewlih.com/blog/)—and notes that Lih is a "long-time Wikipedian" (editor since 2003, an admin with more than 10,000 edits). Some of Lih's post:

> That's a pretty provocative headline. I don't usually do provocative headlines. But Wikipedia has undergone such a dramatic culture shift of late that it merits wider attention.
>
> It may seem like a trivial gripe—should we care about the battle over what stays or goes in this online encyclopedia. But it's an indication there's trouble in Wikipedia's community and its collective soul. Given how many people now depend on the project worldwide, it's a problem that needs to be recognized as a threat that could starve Wikipedia long term.
>
> In my previous post, Wikipedia Plateau, I wondered—what was happening in English Wikipedia that would cause a massive drop in new article creation?
>
> Lots of people chimed in, with over a dozen thoughtful comments. I didn't really buy most of the explanations. New article creation restrictions in December 2005 didn't make sense as a reason for an October 2006 drop.
>
> It's clear an emergent community phenomenon was affecting new articles. And I found something startling—articles like [[Pownce]] and [[Michael Getler]], about new and old topics alike, were equally hit by this new contagion. The fate of just these two articles will surprise most Wikipedians…

Lih recounts his experiences. In the case of Michael Getler, clearly a prominent journalist (ombudsman for PBS, tracked by the CIA, etc.), he didn't find an article—so he created a stub article, traditionally the way to get a new article going.

> I've done this many times before—I bolded the name, made internal wikilinks, included an external source and labeled it a stub. It had all the components any experienced Wikipedian would have created.

> Even a bot looking for basic "articleness" would have found this perfectly acceptable. It was a fine stub. Another user Cmprince edited it to use a more specific "US television" stub tag. Yes, this was the start of a good seed crystal that would grow.
>
> Or so I thought.
>
> Within one hour, a User:Chris9086 came by and slapped a "speedy delete" notice on the page…

I'll spare you a paragraph of inside baseball in the notice (citing seven *Wikipedia* criteria—or, rather, two criteria a total of seven times). Lih's reaction, again as an experienced Wikipedian:

> What the… what manner of… who the… how could any self-respecting Wikipedian imagine this could be deleted?
>
> I've been an editor since 2003, an admin with over 10,000 edits and I had never been this puzzled by a fellow Wikipedian. Did he even bother to check the subject matter, or my user page to see my track record? I wrote on his Talk page:
>
> > …the speedy deletion tag on Michael Getler is inexplicable. Since he is the first-ever ombudsperson for PBS is not only notable, but extremely notable. — Fuzheado | Talk 19:54, 27 June 2007 (UTC)
>
> In the meantime other Wikipedians came and added more to the article. Finally, eight hours later someone (User:JPD) removed the obviously inappropriate deletion notice. Chris9086 eventually got back to me with a one liner:
>
> > It was one sentence long when I added the tag. Chris9086 02:28, 28 June 2007 (UTC)
>
> That was his justification for deleting it. Incredible. This user was so specialized in the chapter and verse of deletion criteria, yet he had no idea about Wikipedia's communal editing culture, its collaborative spirit or the classic essay "The perfect stub article" and its modern recommendations. I was tempted to write a nastygram, "You have a problem. You have a deletion hammer, and everything looks like a nail."

But Lih didn't: He assumed an isolated incident. Until someone posted that the new (and now nearly defunct) Pownce.com didn't have an article. Lih found that unbelievable, particularly since Pownce had good credentials and had already been written about in *BusinessWeek*.

> "Let me prove you oh-so-wrong by clicking in Wikipedia and … what the?!"
>
> Here's what [[Pownce]] read:
>
> > View or restore 37 deleted edits?
> >
> > Wikipedia does not have an article with this exact name.
>
> How in the wiki gods could this be? Have the lunatics taken over the asylum?
>
> The message about "37 deleted edits" is a bit unusual even to experienced Wikipedians. **It's a message only an administrator (like myself) can see**, because admins can view deleted versions, undelete articles and restore pages. [Emphasis added.]
>
> I was flabbergasted. I went into the deleted history, and examined the last version that got deleted. It had an infobox with hard statistics, a "see also" section, external links, the works. The text started:
>
> > Pownce is one of the latest entries in the world of online social networks. But unlike similar websites, its focus is not on meeting people. Pownce is centered around sharing messages, files, events, and links with already established friends. It was created and currently maintained by Digg founder Kevin Rose, with Leah Culver, Daniel Burka, and Shawn Allen.
> >
> > Since the launch on June 27, 2007 new members can only join by friend invite or e-mail request.
>
> Now this is not the best article in the world. It's got some marketingspeak, but it's not unsalvageable. Yet folks nominated it for deletion, and it was indeed deleted, by claiming:
>
> > Previously speedy deleted as spam. While on DRV, where all opinions were to endorse the deletion, the article was recreated. This is advertising about a non-notable website. Corvus cornix 20:02, 8 July 2007 (UTC)
>
> DRV is Deletion Review… It's basically the ash heap where you can revive articles that have been deleted. The article was originally deleted when four users…voted to delete. Only User:DGG had any sense to wait for a DRV outcome.
>
> But at DRV, where you get some more eyeballs to second-guess the decision, it was also unanimous delete. Three users all voted to keep it deleted…The lone voice of dissent was user Tawker.
>
> It's incredible to me that the community in Wikipedia has come to this, that articles so obviously "keep" just a year ago, are being challenged and locked out. When I was active back on the mailing lists in 2004, I was a well known deletionist.
>
> "Wiki isn't paper, but it isn't an attic," I would say. Selectivity matters for a quality encyclopedia.
>
> But it's a whole different mood in 2007. Today, I'd be labeled a wild eyed inclusionist. I suspect most veteran Wikipedians would be labeled a bleeding heart inclusionist too. How did we raise a new generation of folks who want to wipe out so much, who would shoot first, and not ask questions whatsoever?

There's more, but that's probably enough. Except, maybe, for this (before Lih says he's unilaterally undeleting Pownce):

> In a drive for article quality, there have been new policies: citing references, writing biography of living per-

> sons and picking reliable sources. They are all good things, but if and only if they are coupled with existing community values that built Wikipedia—assume good faith, don't bite the newbies (or even oldies), use the talk page, open lines of communication and support each others' work. We've lost these values. The community has gotten so big you cannot recognize people anymore. It lost the village feel a while ago, but it's not even a town or city anymore, it's on the cusp of becoming an impersonal bureaucratic slog depicted in Apple's 1984 video.

Lih's undelete worked. The Talk page shows grumbling from a deletionist and another attempt to delete the article, but as of December 4, 2008, there was a good brief article.

Something's happening here; what it is ain't exactly clear

Lih's post drew 70 comments, which show an interesting range of attitudes on what *Wikipedia* is, was or should be. I found one particularly interesting, saying there are *too few* committed editors to be able to maintain a really large number of articles—another way of saying that, in the long run, crowdsourcing isn't working. Or it could mean one (or all) of three things:

- New people with skill and time to spare aren't coming on board fast enough—and some old Wikipedians are leaving or not doing much new.
- The large cabal of insiders has made it so difficult to create and edit material without constant vigilance and memorizing a large set of arcane rules that newcomers are either scared away or turned off.
- Too many editors are spending their time deleting articles (and arguing about things) rather than improving them.

I suspect all three may be true. I've seen enough to not wish to become a true Wikipedian. The third one is odd, particularly when people cite "credibility" as the reason to delete articles. If articles are for non-noteworthy subjects, isn't it likely that obscurity will take care of credibility problems? That is: *Wikipedia*'s quality and credibility are likely to be judged by how the articles *that people look for* and can compare with other sources stack up. A sloppy article on the backup guitarist in a band nobody's heard of, or some relatively obscure library person, *may not matter* because people won't be looking for it. The articles that need vigilant editing are the ones likely to be searched frequently.

Here's a comment from "Stbalbach":

> I'm a long time editor, since 2003, ranked in the top 300 by number of edits (most in article space). On May 11th 2007 I mostly gave up on Wikipedia - there is something wrong with the community, in particular people deleting content. I'd never seen anything like it prior to late 2006 and 2007. Further, the use of "nag tags" at the top of articles is out of hand. It's easier to nag and delete than it is to research and fix. Too many know-nothings who want to "help" have found a powerful niche by nagging and deleting without engaging in dialog and simply citing 3 letter rules. If a user is unwilling or incapable of working to improve an article they should not be placing nag tags or deleting content.

As a mere user, I've noticed an astonishing number of "nag tags," graphics and flags saying an article needs work of one sort or another. Is the problem better now than it was when this discussion took place (mostly July 2007)? I have no way to answer that question. What percentage of editorial effort goes to actual cleanup and improvement, vs. deletion proposals and discussion, vs. various bureaucratic wars? I have no idea—and, frankly, wouldn't want to know. I am *deeply* suspicious to see "there just aren't enough editors to make for good articles" used as an excuse for policies that clearly discourage newcomers from getting involved as editors.

What's really happening? For one thing—and this one's *absolutely predictable* in a rapidly-growing wiki or anything else—*Wikipedia* has gotten big enough that growth (since September 2006) has moved from exponential (e.g., doubling each year) to linear (e.g., growing by a relatively similar number of articles each year). *That had to happen sooner or later*: exponential growth in almost any field, particularly any human endeavor, is unsustainable after some point. Actually, though, growth is a little less than linear at this point: While the annual increase in articles was 665,000 during 2006 (apparently the peak), it dropped to 593,000 for 2007—and a little further to 570,000 for August 2007-July 2008. But, you know, that's *still* an awful lot of new articles (probably including a lot of awful new articles). If the Deletionists are holding sway, you'd expect a much sharper drop. After all, if there weren't enough editors to maintain quality control on 1.915 million articles on August 1, 2007, how can there *possibly* be enough to maintain quality control on 2.485 million on August 1, 2008?

As Carr was saying…

Getting back to Nicholas Carr's post, here's some of his commentary:

> [G]iven human nature, is it really so "incredible" that Wikipedia has evolved as it has? Although writers like Yochai Benkler have presented Wikipedia as an example of how widescale, volunteer-based "social production" on the Internet can exist outside hierarchical

> management structures, the reality is very different. As Wikipedia has grown, it has developed a bureaucracy that is remarkable not only for the intricacies of its hierarchy but for the breadth and complexity of its rules. The reason Deletionism has triumphed so decisively over Inclusionism is pretty simple: It's because Deletionism provides a path toward ever more elaborate schemes of rule-making—with no end—and that's the path that people prefer, at least when they become members of a large group. The development of Wikipedia's organization provides a benign case study in the political malignancy of crowds…
>
> Maybe the time has come for Wikipedia to amend its famous slogan. Maybe it should call itself "the encyclopedia that anyone can edit on the condition that said person meets the requirements laid out in Wikipedia Code 234.56, subsections A34-A58, A65, B7 (codicil 5674), and follows the procedures specified in Wikipedia Statutes 31 - 1007 as well as Secret Wikipedia Scroll SC72 (Wikipedia Decoder Ring required)."

The first comment notes that similar things happened with Usenet groups and (some) email lists. "A variation of the tragedy of the commons seems to apply." Seth Finkelstein thinks it's the other way around: That Inclusionism provides a path toward ever more elaborate schemes of rule-making. Carr counters that rules and laws *tend* to be "deletionist"—and, you know, "Thou shalt not" (and modern variants) is a lot more common approach than "Thou shalt."

Another comment notes a particularly sour experience: A person who adapted an article from his own site, on a significant topic, for *Wikipedia*; spent four or five hours getting it right using MediaWiki rules; and, a couple months later, found it deleted for copyright violation *because he'd used his own material*. This person now promises never to spend time improving *Wikipedia* again: "It's a bureaucracy, nothing more." One person points out one real problem with quick deletions: *Everything* disappears.

One comment is remarkable—at more than 1,000 words, it's 50% longer than the post it comments on. Here's a relatively mild paragraph near the start of the megacomment:

> At Wikipedia, Jimmy Wales has set a tone of competitiveness (which is all about winning) vindictiveness (winning at any cost) and hatred (a typical human-to-human emotion). He has stated often that he is anti-credentialist (his neologism for anti-intellectual and win-at-all-costs) and often cites his refusal to contribute to the Nupedia project is because he (understandably) feels "intimidated" by letting experts review anything he has written within the area of his training (economics). He would rather have amateurs review his writings.

As I say, that's mild—there's much harsher commentary later on. Is it justified? I have no idea. After wasting *way* too much time in various Wikipedia talk pages (including the remarkable User talk:Jimbo Wales), I am mostly reminded of old sayings about weakest links and committee IQs. And have to go look at some articles to remind myself that, for all its weaknesses, *Wikipedia* has many strengths, at least as a starting point and timewaster.

Wikipedia: The so-called "encyclopedia" that any axe-grinder can edit-war

Not *my* title, that's Seth Finkelstein's title for an August 24, 2007 post at *Infothought*—and the example has to do with MichaelMoore.com and a lengthy set of edits involving a Wikipedian who's also a conservative critic of Michael Moore. By this time, the original details are no longer available, but here's what Finkelstein has to say:

> [I]t's misleading to give just the raw number of edits—some edits were unobjectionable vandalism-fighting. And it's almost certain that Ted Frank wasn't acting in any official capacity. So it's just another day on Wikipedia, where ideological factions battle each other for the prize of getting their spin in a high Google ranking position.
>
> Except that item set off yet another edit-war, a "meta"-issue fight, having to do with a Wikipedia administrative faction deeming MichaelMoore.com an "attack site". Which would make it liable to the penalty of having all its links purged from Wikipedia, as a kind of banishment. And that's scary.
>
> It's hard to convey to the acolytes within the cult of Wikipedia how petty and in fact, downright creepy, it can appear to outsiders. At this point more sane Wikipedia administrators will pop up and say it's just a few bad apples, the other admins will keep them in check. And my reply there is that still reveals a pretty disturbing sociological aspect of Wikipedia. Especially one that might give pause to the impulse to proclaim lots of experts should work for free to increase its power and respectability (and notably also increasing the capability of small cliques of Wikipedia admins to engage in political vendettas).

In an update, Finkelsteinlinks to what he calls a "full-blown Wikipedia-DRAMA," which as of this writing is still available at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia: Administrators%27_noticeboard/IncidentArchive290#Michael Moore.com_-_hypocrisy.3F

You may *not* want to click on that link (it's a section of a much larger page full of Wikipedia administrative battles). It's filled with much more heat than light. If you do, notice the date tags: As far as I can tell, this long, extended, multipart war took place over two

days. In which case, I can see why editors don't have time to maintain quality control. Between wars like this, an average of 88-100 proposed Articles for Deletion each day *plus* some unknown number of quick deletions, they're too busy doing this sort of thing.

All of which may be useful background to…

Inside Higher Ed–"Professors Should Embrace Wikipedia"–April Fool?

That's Finkelstein's tag for an April 1, 2008 post discussing Mark Wilson's article (the quoted portion) in the April 1, 2008 *Inside Higher Ed* (www.insidehighered.com/views/2008/04/01/Wilson). Wilson cites the growth of *Wikipedia*. He *misstates* the results of the *Nature* comparison (which did *not* show *Wikipedia*'s accuracy to be "actually as high as the revered *Encyclopedia Britannica"*), but he does give Larry Sanger credit as a cofounder. Then he discusses "academic authority, or at least the perception of it"—and shortly after that exposes what I regard as a simple misunderstanding of how Wikipedia works:

> The very anonymity of the editors is often the source of the problem: how do we know who has an authoritative grasp of the topic?

Given current attitudes and policies, that's an irrelevant question—because *Wikipedia* does not admit to authority. He then proposes a solution:

> That is what academics do best. We can quickly sort out scholarly authority into complex hierarchies with a quick glance at a vita and a sniff at a publication list. We make many mistakes doing this, of course, but at least our debates are supported with citations and a modicum of civility because we are identifiable and we have our reputations to maintain and friends to keep. Maybe this academic culture can be added to the Wild West of Wikipedia to make it more useful for everyone?
>
> I propose that all academics with research specialties, no matter how arcane (and nothing is too obscure for Wikipedia), enroll as identifiable editors of Wikipedia. We then watch over a few wikipages of our choosing, adding to them when appropriate, stepping in to resolve disputes when we know something useful. We can add new articles on topics which should be covered, and argue that others should be removed or combined. This is not to displace anonymous editors, many of whom possess vast amounts of valuable information and innovative ideas, but to add our authority and hard-won knowledge to this growing universal library.

But "knowing something useful" doesn't matter. Only being able to cite something from a source acceptable by policy matters. Not that having more scholars involved with *Wikipedia* wouldn't help, but it's not that simple. He goes on to suggest that this offers "another outlet for our scholarship"—but it's an outlet that *can't* be properly acknowledged, since *Wikipedia* doesn't allow for signed articles or sections of articles.

Finkelstein quotes the first two sentences of that second paragraph ("I propose that…useful") and comments:

> If the writer is serious, I'm going to save this for proof of one reason I'm so critical of Wikipedia. Namely, the proposals that experts should work for free, donating their time and energy in terms of grunt work to support the deliberate design choice of Wikipedia to favor quantity over quality.
>
> It's really a triumph of marketing over academic standards. Set up a system where any troll, vandal, or axe-grinder can mess up a carefully worded article. Then get experts (and others) to volunteer to fight off the trolls, vandals, and axe-grinders. *Then* claim this is the "wisdom of crowds," where the result of all that uncompensated effort and perhaps burned-out contributors shows that, magically, openness produces respectable material.

As always, the comments are interesting. Jon Garfunkel notes Wilson's ignorance of *Citizendium.* Crosbie Fitch says, in part, "If Wikipedia had a decent reputation system then professors would have joined in already… When a professor's edits/words hold the same weight as those of a preschooler (and such weight cannot be adjusted in light of merit) then participation is considerably discouraged." C.C. Pugh seems to argue that "publicly funded" academics (and many aren't) are "failing their constituents if they don't contribute to public understanding"—essentially, that editing *Wikipedia* should be considered part of a public college academic's job.

Ah, but what of comments on the article itself? Some academics and others are all for it. Some are profoundly anti-*Wikipedia*. Brian Fisher brings up *Citizendium*. One academic seems to take it on himself to defend *Wikipedia* against other commenters. Larry Sanger takes issue with the claim that "the vision of its founders…has become reality," saying "this is false" and objecting to having his name used in any attempt to encourage professors to get involved in *Wikipedia*:

> *My* vision has always been for a maximally reliable information resource—not one that is controlled by faceless, often hostile, often irresponsible people, many of them teenagers and college students.

He explains why he cannot "in good conscience recommend that any serious knowledge professional participate in *Wikipedia*" and suggests *Inside Higher Education* take a look at *Citizendium*. I find it interest-

ing that those most enamored of *Wikipedia* (mostly users) either don't read other comments or apparently lend no credence to anyone in any way critical of it.

Closing

Once again, the felt need to elaborate overwhelms the source material—one good reason I shouldn't be a Wikipedian. If some of you are saying "Why does Walt hate *Wikipedia* so much?" I'm not sure how to respond. I don't hate *Wikipedia*. I use it. But it needs criticism, openly and often—the more so given the way it works internally.

When it comes to notability, I'd tend to be an inclusionist—for example, if 2.5 million articles are already acceptable in the English-language version, then wouldn't (for example) inclusion in *Who's Who in America* be enough to justify a biographical entry (unless the subject wants no part of it)? That is, after all, some level of prominence with verifiability from a trustworthy source.

Iris Jastram recently noted that "libloggers seem to have gotten bored with writing about Wikipedia some time ago." I think that's true. I think it's a little unfortunate. (Jastram nails it more broadly: "Libloggers are only a sliver of the profession, and it's a sliver that gets bored with some topics very easily.") She found that "Wikipedia Angst" was out in force at a conference she attended and wondered whether it's glib to say "we should just get over it already?" She hasn't decided. Personally, I think "get over it" is *always* an unfortunate response—and "getting over" the manifest and possibly growing problems with *Wikipedia* would be as unfortunate as it would be to obsess over *Wikipedia* or demand people ignore it entirely.

Two websites attempt to deal with "authority" in *Wikipedia* algorithmically. Wikiscanner (wikiscanner.virgil.gr) looks for self-interested edits; at this writing, it's between versions. The other, WikiTrust (trust.cse.ucsc.edu/), shows the "computed trust" of an article, coloring the background of articles depending on "trust." WikiTrust can also be added to other MediaWiki wikis to show "trust." The algorithm for trust is interesting:

> First, we compute the reputation of each author by analyzing the author's contributions. When an author makes a contribution that is preserved in subsequent edits, the author gains reputation. When an author makes a contribution that is undone or reverted quickly, the author loses reputation.
>
> The trust value of a new word is proportional to the reputation of its author. When subsequent authors edit the page, words that are left unchanged gain trust: by leaving them there, the authors implicitly agree with them. Words closer to the edit gain more trust, as the author of the edit is likely to have paid more attention to them. In contrast, text that has been rearranged (new text, text at the border of cut-and-paste, etc) has again a reputation proportional to the author of the edit.

There's a certain circularity to this, but it's nonetheless intriguing. Not that either tool can or should settle the maze of issues surrounding *Wikipedia*'s stature—not its usefulness but, in the end, its reliability.

Retrospective
Pointing with Pride Part 9

I found the "missing issue"—and it turns out to be a slightly different problem. Somehow, I managed to mark *both* September 2004 and October 2004 as Whole Issue 54—and have been one off ever since.

The solution shows up here and in Part 10.

Midsummer 2001: Number 9

In retrospect, this seems like a geeky issue, full of PC stuff—not unusual for 2001. This portion of PRODUCT WATCH is revealing not only for the price and weight but also for a numbers game that has, I believe, disappeared in recent years.

The Really Big Show

> Who would pay $3,499 for a 36" 4x3 TV set? Even Sony XBRs don't cost *that* much, and they're the best direct-view sets you can buy (in my opinion). But Princeton Graphics' Ai3.6HD isn't just a TV set. It's also a multimedia monitor with built-in CPU, 16MB flash memory and 64MB SDRAM, Internet access, and a bunch of connections—as well as a TV tuner and internal line doubler. It's a high-definition display ("compatible with 480p, 720p, and 1080i input") but requires an external HD tuner—and, given its 4x3 rather than 16x9 ratio, it's not a good choice for HDTV (or DVD viewing, for that matter).
>
> *PC Magazine* gives this beast (210 pounds) a five-dot rave and calls it a "killer display" that's "a natural for board rooms, company lobbies, training facilities, or any other location where a versatile display is desirable." It's certainly one of the biggest PC-compatible displays you can buy, and appears compatible with almost any input.
>
> Unfortunately, you have to be wary of some claims. "As a computer monitor, the Ai.36HD can display at resolutions of 640-by-480 (85 Hz maximum), 800-by-600 (75 Hz), and 1,024-by-768 (60 Hz)." Yes and no. Two sentences later we learn that this display has an Invar Shadow Mask CRT (that is, it's *not* a Trini-

tron display) with an 0.90-mm stripe pitch (which is confusing, because stripe pitches *are* for Trinitron/Diamondtron displays: shadow mask CRTs normally have dot pitches).

Do the math. Assuming this uses TV-set standards rather than monitor standards, 36" is the *visible* diagonal measure (always true for TV sets) rather than the tube size (the phony number used in monitor ads). That means the visible area is 21.6x28.8 inches. There are 25.4 millimeters to an inch. Dividing by the dot pitch or stripe pitch of 0.9mm, we get 28.2 dots per inch. Thus—barring magic—the tube can *physically resolve* 813x609 dots. Any resolution higher than 800x600 represents wishful thinking and approximate display—the unit can accept higher resolution but not accurately display the results.

I'm not knocking Princeton. Fun and games regarding actual resolution seem to be standard practice for very large data displays. Note that 0.90mm is a *TV* figure. PC monitors typically have 0.24-0.26mm stripe pitch or dot pitch, sometimes a little finer, almost never coarser except on cheapo no-name displays.

April 2002: Number 19

The lead item in TRENDS AND QUICK TAKES (this was pre-ampersand) was "Perfect Compression!" I just love this sort of thing…

Any long-time *Analog* readers out there? You might remember the Dean Drive, an obsession of the great editor John W. Campbell, Jr.. It had many of the elements of perpetual motion machines and true exothermic systems—that is, systems that *create* energy without converting matter. As I remember, once an independent party actually tested the Dean Drive, they determined that its supposed miraculous properties (demonstrated by reducing the measured weight of a platform running the drive) came about by disturbing the scale itself.

Perfect compression is like perpetual motion or faster-than-light travel (without using workarounds such as black holes). It's mathematically impossible, for reasons that don't require much more than common sense to demonstrate. It is mathematically impossible to create a program that will compress *any* file by at least one bit in total length (when combining the output file and needed tracking information) in such a way that the original file can be restored without change.

That's lossless compression—what you get in Zip archives, for example. It's quite different than lossy compression (e.g., Jpeg, MP3, MPEG-2 as used for DVDs), where the nature of the data is known and the intent is to restore a version that's *perceived* as equivalent to the original. You can't use lossy compression for spreadsheets, word processing, or software itself: there are no characters in this text that a person can't read because they're obscured by other characters or because your verbal acuity doesn't recognize them or care about them. Notably, lossy compression requires detailed knowledge of the kind of file being processed.

Here's a common sense demonstration that perfect lossless compression is impossible. If it's possible, then you can remove at least one bit from *any* file—including a file that's already been compressed. Thus, logically, you can reduce any file to a single bit without loss of original information. (Actually, you could reduce any file to *zero* bits if perfect compression was possible.)

In practice, any lossless compression algorithm will *expand* some files while compressing others. That appears to be mathematically demonstrable as well, but we've reached the limits of my mathematical prowess. In real life, of course, it works that way: Zipped archives of previously compressed files can be considerably larger than the originals.

But where there's money, there's always a will. A January 16 *Wired News* item discusses ZeoSync, a Florida company that announced on January 7 that it "has succeeded in reducing the expression of practically random information sequences." The press release asserts flatly, "ZeoSync's mathematical breakthrough overcomes limitations of data compression theory." More specifically, Peter St. George asserts that the company's algorithms constitute "a significant breakthrough to the historical limitations of digital communications as it was originally detailed by Dr. Claude Shannon in his treatise on Information Theory." That seems to negate the "practically random" loophole earlier in the release.

The press release is riddled with trademarks and oddly worded claims. Supposedly, the company collaborates with top experts throughout academia. The *Wired* item includes a brief interview with St. George, one that includes no details at all but asserts that details would be announced in "a few days" from January 16. Naturally, ZeoSync plans to be filing a bunch of "proprietary patents."

What happened "a few days" later? Nothing that's been reported. A handful of online and press outlets ran portions of ZeoSync's press release without much skepticism; some, including *New Scientist*, were more doubtful.

Claims of this sort have popped up over the years, sometimes as part of startup companies, including WEB Technologies in 1992 and Jules Gilbert in 1996 and beyond. (Gilbert didn't claim perfect compression—but *did* claim that 100:1 or 1000:1 lossless compression was feasible "if the input file is sufficiently large." Gilbert also claimed that he could compress a 3MB file to 50KB without loss of information.) Generally, such claims fade away after a few months as they are put to independent test.

Could ZeoSync be the exception? Watch for further news, but don't be surprised if there isn't any.

According to *Wikipedia*, "the technology was never demonstrated, and the company's website disappeared a few months later." Why am I not surprised?

December 2002: Number 29

Here's the first segment of THE LIBRARY STUFF—back from when I still thought Pew Internet & American Life might be an objective research operation:

> Jones, Steve, et al, "The Internet goes to college," Pew Internet & American Life Project, September 15, 2002 (www.pewinternet.org), and Surmacz, Jon, "Libraries don't stack up," *Darwin*, September 18, 2002 (64.28.79.73/ learn/numbers/index.cfm)
>
> I chose the *Darwin* story almost at random as one of many odd little stories about the recent Pew survey report. The report itself is interesting but also raises a few unanswered questions. For example, the most talked-about finding, that 73% of college students say they use the Internet more than the library while 9% use the library more than the Internet. My question would be: What proportion of that 73% are, to some extent, using Internet materials that are available because of library subscriptions, specifically online databases and full-text aggregations? Without an answer to that question, the number is fairly meaningless.
>
> Some of the report comments strike me as odd, such as this one: "Surprisingly, only about half (47%) of college students said they are *required* to use email in their classes." (Emphasis added.) Why *should* students be required to use email in their classes? Back when dinosaurs roamed the earth and I was at UC Berkeley, I'd guess most students never communicated directly with their professors during most courses, and none of us was ever required to use postal mail or submit written comments as part of our courses. What makes email so special that it should be required? This only makes sense if the assumption is that all interaction must be forced into technological channels. In practice, three-quarters of students *did* send email to faculty in classes and 82% of the students have been contacted via email by professors, so I don't see the problem.
>
> Maybe Pew does have a technological imperative. On p. 19, the researchers note that students aren't committed to distance learning. "Their current behaviors show them using the Internet as an educational tool supplementing traditional classroom education, and it may be difficult to *convince them to abandon* the traditional setting after they have had the kinds of attention afforded them in the college classroom." (Emphasis added.) Again, what makes it necessary to "convince" students to abandon models that work well? There's another point here: How is it that the Pew researchers can casually assume that student habits and practices will simply carry forward into the workplace? The shock of the real world, both staggering and refreshing, seems likely to be as relevant to today's college students as to any other.
>
> Finally, although the methodology for the statistical surveys are stated well and appear to involve a large enough sample for reasonable confidence, there are no numbers attached to the observational notes, although these play a significant role in the text. Were there three observations? Three hundred? Are Chicago colleges typical of the nation as a whole?
>
> The study's worth reading if you haven't already encountered it—but I would probably have ignored it except for the ancillary reports. Surmacz' story is typical, with a wildly misleading headline followed by an odd story. In the very first paragraph, Steve Jones says that "the findings shouldn't alarm librarians," yet the headline says "libraries don't stack up." Later, Jones says that students used to go to the library to study and socialize—but now they're "much more purposeful…Many go there to study or get materials." Surmacz turns that into "students go to the library with one purpose—to do research." In practice, neither is quite what the study says, and that part of the study is weakened by its pure observational nature. Here's a direct quote: "Rather, email use, instant messaging and Web-surfing dominated students' computer activity in the library." That's research? I see nothing in the report saying that students *don't* socialize in libraries, and I've been in enough academic libraries in the last few years to consider such a finding highly improbable.

August 2003: Number 39

Just as a little reminder that copyright hardliners can sometimes be *really* hardline—and, by the way, that elected officials happily serve as the servants of Big Media, here's part of a COPYRIGHT CURRENTS:

> **A Little Collateral Damage**
>
> In a related earlier story, Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) surprised even some copyright hardnoses during a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing. According to an AP article, Hatch asked technology executives about ways to *damage* computers engaged in file trading. A spokesman for MediaDefender, a company that builds technology to download files slowly so that other users can't get at them, said "No one is interested in destroying anyone's computer."
>
> Hatch interrupted: "I'm interested." Later: "If we can find some way to do this without destroying their machines, we'd be interested in hearing about that. If that's the only way, then *I'm all for destroying their machines*." Hatch said if a *few hundred thousand* people

suffered damage to their computers, the online community would realize the clampdown was serious. [Emphases added.] Senator Patrick Leahy (senior Democrat on the committee) found this a bit much. "The rights of copyright holders need to be protected, but some draconian remedies that have been suggested would create more problems than they would solve." You think?

Hatch issued a brief press release the next day "clarifying" what he'd said:

> I am very concerned about Internet piracy of personal and copyrighted materials, and I want to find effective solutions to these problems.
>
> I made my comments at yesterday's hearing because I think that industry is not doing enough to help us find effective ways to stop people from using computers to steal copyrighted, personal or sensitive materials. I do not favor extreme remedies—**unless no moderate remedies can be found**. I asked the interested industries to help us find those moderate remedies. [Emphasis added]

Edward Felten notes the addition of "personal or sensitive" to the mix—and that the press, among others, should be alarmed by this addition.

May 2004: Issue 49

The first product in INTERESTING & PECULIAR PRODUCTS, the Kaleidescape Movie Server, with an update:

> Sometimes when I'm feeling affluent, it's good to be reminded that the term has many meanings. *Sound & Vision* certainly isn't aimed at plutocrats. Compared to high-end stereo magazines, it's Everyman's publication. Which makes John Sciacca's highly favorable review of this device (in the February/March 2004 issue) all the more amazing.
>
> "This device" is a "system that does for movies what hard-drive storage has already done for music." Understand the problem that's being solved: "Why should you be forced to enjoy your DVDs in the same old 20th-century manner?... And how do you manage that library of 100, 200, or 500 titles? How do remember what movies you have or decide what you want to watch?" 100 DVDs: That's enough to require a four-foot shelf! No wonder people are desperate for a solution! What if they had 200 books or CDs? How would they ever find what they wanted? What to do, what to do?
>
> The solution consists of a DVD reader, a movie player, and a server. The server holds up to 12 hard disks. All the pieces connect via "Fast" Ethernet (100Mbps, not 1Gbps). The movie player connects to your TV. You load all your DVDs onto the hard disk, pulling information from a web-based database in the process, then play them from the server. The database service makes this into "a video godsend," according to the review, because it makes "the act of selecting a movie entertaining in itself." You can sort by actor! You can sort by genre! You can sort by director or MPAA rating! Heck, you can browse by the cover—let's see you choose one out of 200 boring old physical DVDs by looking at covers!
>
> Oh, and when you pause on a cover, the device gives you other titles that are "like" that one. "This sounds simple—Amazon.com does it all the time—but I found it to be *phenomenally* cool, and I spent *lots* of time with it." Sciacca even made a game out of predicting what Kaleidescape would pick. (I suppose you could do that with Netflix, which has a great "more like this" capability—but that would miss the coolest aspect of this server, coming soon.)
>
> Here's what's really cool. You get all this functionality for a mere $27,000 with enough disk space for 160 DVDs (presumably four 300GB drives). Since you spent as much as $3,200 for those 160 DVDs, this seems like a real bargain: You're paying a bit less than *nine times as much* so you don't have to alphabetize boxes and can do neat sorting. If you want to store 440 DVDs, the maximum capacity of one server, that will be $33,000. If you have two TVs, figure another $4,000 for another movie player—and, after all, a good DVD drive would cost $100 or so!
>
> By the way, the lab tests of the unit were "slightly disappointing," given that it emulates a progressive-scan DVD drive. Well, you know, for a mere $26,500 more than a first-rate DVD player would cost, or $23,000 more than 160 DVDs and a first-rate player, what do you expect? Perfection?
>
> I guess I'm not really affluent after all. We own more than 70 DVDs, but so far keeping track of them hasn't been an issue. If it was, I think I could bring myself to key the necessary information into Access or Excel so I could do all those fancy sorts. At least to save $26,000, I could!

OK, "four foot shelf" for 100 DVDs was wrong. That *might* be true for individual traditional packages, but I have a set of 60 DVDs that fit in a 6"x5.5" space, and modern slimpack TV sets typically offer 6 DVDs in a ¾" package. Newer Kaleidescape units can cost as "little" as $13,000—but they're still absurdly expensive. Oh, and the DVD folks sued Kaleidescape for violating the DVD license…somehow, Big Media's afraid that somebody who blows $13K and up on a player will borrow $20 DVDs and rip them to save money. So far, Kaleidescape's winning.

But then there's a somewhat ugly followup. Kaleidescape's now pushing the notion that their hot new DVD chips make regular DVDs look just as good as Blu-ray—much as Toshiba intimates that their upconverting DVD player offers picture quality equivalent to

Blu-ray. We *know* why Toshiba's pushing this physical impossibility (after all, they're still bruised from their singular support of HD DVD). Kaleidescape? Hard to say. Do note "physical impossibility": It is literally impossible for any DVD upscaler to offer *actual* picture quality equal to a Blu-ray DVD. You can interpolate, you can upsample—but you can't generate information that isn't there.

Midwinter 2005: Issue 59

Some pundits never change—and while the internet certainly isn't "the undoing of society and civilization," it may (or may not) have been the undoing of *PC Magazine* as a print magazine:

> "The Internet will prove to be the undoing of society and civilization as we know it." Why? Because of "the Web's natural ability to remove normal interpersonal structures that prevent society from falling into chaos." Hmm? "Almost everyone on the Net is anonymous." "Haughty bloggers" who "hide behind a good online template" are taken seriously and "may even become famous" if he/she stays hidden long enough." The entire political scene has become totally dichotomous, and that's "thanks to the net." "If it were up to me, I'd shut down the Net tomorrow and make people get out of the house and mingle."
>
> Who's writing this over-the-top screed? John C. Dvorak, or some whack job posing as Dvorak successfully enough to take over Dvorak's *PC Magazine* column (23:19, p. 61). And, of course, Dvorak has a special weekly column that only appears on…the Web. For which I suspect he makes very good money. Little wonder that the best letter four pages earlier in the issue offers "proof positive that John Dvorak is the complete idiot that I've believed him to be all these years" for claiming that the "D" in Class D audio amplification stands for "digital." (It doesn't, and Class D amplifiers have been around for a long time.) The last line of the letter was good enough to be the callout for the letters page: "John Dvorak's column is a vastly entertaining piece of highly opinionated fiction." Except it's rarely entertaining these days.

February 2005: Actual Issue 60

Here's a segment of TRENDS & QUICK TAKES that's still relevant…

> **Patent Holding Companies**
>
> A December 16 (2004) news.com story by John Borland notes that Acacia Research is buying Global Patent Holdings. So what? So this: Global Patent Holdings is one of those beloved companies whose only products appear to be litigation and licenses—companies that buy patents developed elsewhere, then make the broadest possible claims and threaten to sue any company deemed in violation of the patents.
>
> As you should know, some technology-related patents are wildly overbroad—but for many companies, paying for a license is less expensive and less hassle than going to court and attempting to invalidate the patent. The story begins, "In the streaming media business, a letter from Acacia Research usually means one thing: the threat of a patent lawsuit." The purchase will make Acacia more of a "patent powerhouse"—the CEO explicitly says the goal is "becoming the leading technology licensing company."
>
> Not "the company that creates the best technology and licenses it." Creation—"the progress of science and useful arts" as the Constitution calls it in the copyright-and-patent clause—isn't what these companies are all about. These companies produce licenses and litigation. (Former Microsoft CTO Nathan Myhrvold has founded a similar company, Intellectual Ventures, with close to a thousand patents already.)
>
> I'm not wild about patent holding companies. Edward Felten disagrees, in a January 12, 2005 *Freedom to tinker* posting: "From a policy standpoint I don't see a problem." He makes some good points, *if* we're dealing with legitimate patents. Patent holding companies can provide a level ground for smaller inventors: True. Inventors should be able to focus on invention, not on extracting royalties: Also true.
>
> As Felten says, "those who support rational patent policy should focus on setting up the right patent rules (whatever they are), and applying those rules to whoever happens to own each patent." He's right, of course: My outrage at patent holding companies is based on the *kind* of patents we hear about and the overbroad claims. If smaller companies and inventors actually do rely on patent holding companies to gain justifiable rewards for their real inventions, there's no reason to object.
>
> The two comments I saw on the posting when I downloaded it (the day it was posted—there may be more since) both acknowledged this. Grant Gould noted what's needed to make the patent system "economically efficient" (and just from a policy perspective): "strong prior-art investigations, a more objective obviousness criterion tied to the likelihood of reinvention during the patent term, an independent reinvention defense to infringement claims, increasing renewal fees tied to the price of a license." "Skopo" says Felten "misses the point"—which is not that the holding companies have no other business but that some of the patents being enforced are overbroad. I don't know that Felten misses that point, but it's a good one. I withdraw my general outrage over companies whose only business is to enforce patents they purchase, although their aggressiveness may itself be

a problem. The bigger problem is patents that are too broad and, in many IT-related cases, should never have been issued.

Mid-Fall 2005: Actual Issue 70

I didn't coin "Life trumps blogging"—although I'd love to take credit for it. That's the title for the lead PERSPECTIVE in this issue, an issue in which the *entire* remainder is one very large PERSPECTIVE springing from a long piece at LISNews.

I'll recommend the latter piece, but it doesn't excerpt neatly. I think it stands up better and better as we near 2010…

I won't quote the "Ltb" piece either, but I will quote the last two paragraphs, for those who skimmed the earlier piece (or read only some snarky reactions) and somehow think it was actually slamming blogging:

> Why do you blog? Farkas' survey of the biblioblogosphere revealed a number of interesting reasons. I'll argue that fame and fortune should never be motivations for library blogging. Otherwise, almost any reason will do—except, I believe, "because everybody should have a blog."
>
> Life trumps blogging. For that matter, life usually trumps writing. But for most of us, most of the time, life has room for secondary pursuits. All the writers noted have continued to blog or have come back to blogging, because they still have something to say.

July 2006: Actual Issue 80

In lieu of trying to summarize "Scan This Book?" (why bother? Kevin Kelly is another of those who are always treated as brilliant futurists no matter how often they're wrong or how silly they are), I'll quote a brief item from MY BACK PAGES that may help show why I shed no tears when *Business 2.0* disappeared:

> **Ethics are for Suckers**
>
> The article title is "Tricking out those parked domains," in the "What's cool" section of the May 2006 *Business 2.0*. It's a story about websites that are nothing but links to advertisers. They're con jobs: They serve no purpose other than to garner ad revenue when someone clicks on a link. Now, they're getting fancy: Services will add a few hundred words of "content" to try to improve the chances of landing on one of these sites, by foiling web search engine algorithms.
>
> Many of the sites are domain names that might be plausible, or domains snatched because their original owners didn't renew them promptly, or domains that spell words slightly differently.
>
> The article isn't denouncing these sites. It's offering "A few cheap and easy secrets [that] can help you capture a bigger share of the Internet ad boom." Next to "What's cool" at the top of the page it says "Playing the angles." After all, you might make money.

May 2007: Actual Issue 90

I'll let this one go with part of the lead item in BIBS & BLATHER, an item that may say more about the state of library literature than anything else.

> **On Being Cited**
>
> I saw it as the first item on my chatterwall on the Library 2.0 Ning, from Marcus Elmore on March 21:
>
> > Hi Walt—The new issue of *C&RL* arrived and I opened it only to discover that you're one of the 28 most frequently cited LIS scholars of the past decade—congrats!
>
> "Well, that's interesting," I thought—particularly given that I'm not a scholar at all. Not having *C&RL* at hand, I contacted editor Bill Potter, who was kind enough to send the table of "Most Cited Personal Authors, 1994-2004" from "Analysis of a decade in library literature: 1994-2004," by Kelly Blessinger and Michele Frasier, *College & Research Libraries* March 2007, pp. 155-169.
>
> When I first looked at the table I noted a couple of things (after sending a note about this recognition to select superiors and coworkers):
>
> - I'm one of only two on the list (31 names—28 ranks but with three ties) who aren't academic librarians. The other: Maurice Line, director of the British Library. For that matter, it appears that 25 or 26 of the 31 are library school faculty…
> - As far as I can tell, only eight of the 31 are women, in a woman-dominated profession.
>
> A couple of caveats: I'm *not* the 27th most widely cited author for that period—I'm the 27th most widely cited in 2,220 journal articles from ten of 28 LIS journals meeting the study's criteria. It's quite possible that I'd fall out of the top group if all 28 were studied…

I'll save the actual Issue 100 for the last section.

Offtopic Perspective

50 Movie Hollywood Legends, Part 2

Disc 7

Let's Live a Little, 1948, b&w. Richard Wallace (dir.), Hedy Lamarr, Robert Cummings, Anna Sten, Robert Shayne. 1:25 [1:24].

> Robert (Bob) Cummings plays an overworked ad man (Duke Crawford—what a name!) whose ex-fiancée is

also his client. She wants him back, holding up the contract renewal to get him. Meanwhile, there's a psychiatrist with a new book entitled *Let's Live a Little* and Duke is assigned to work on promoting it. He meets the psychiatrist, a beautiful woman, and he's having a bit of a nervous breakdown. The psychiatrist shares an office suite with her maybe-boyfriend, a surgeon (doesn't every shrink work next to a cutter?). Various light romantic-comedy stuff ensues, as does semi-psychiatric stuff—people hearing bells and seeing the wrong people—with what is apparently a happy ending. There's a wonderful sequence early on. Cummings is on his way to meet the doctor, hasn't had time to shave, so jumps into one of a fleet of cabs equipped with electric razors: An idea he created. He gets distracted and shaves off half his mustache—thus, not unreasonably, causing the office receptionist and psychiatrist to assume he's a patient.

Cummings is great at this sort of role. Hedy Lamarr as the psychiatrist is first-rate as usual. Anna Sten as the ex-fiancée/cosmetics boss chews the scenery a little, and that's probably appropriate for her role. It's a decent little romantic-neurosis comedy. The print's choppy at times and there's a significant break in flow that's either some missing minutes or pretty abrupt editing. One real oddity: In the opening credits, there's a black shape superimposed on the lower right corner of the screen, obviously added in post-production. Did the original production company bail, leaving this to "United California Productions Inc.," which as far as I can tell never released another movie? The sound is marred by heavy white noise, unfortunately, the main reason I can't give this more than $1.00.

Lady of Burlesque, 1943, b&w. William A. Wellman (dir.), Barbara Stanwyck, Michael O'Shea, Iris Adrian, Charles Dingle, J. Edward Bromberg, Frank Conroy, Pinky Lee. 1:31 [1:27].

This is a mystery with comedy and musical numbers, based on *The G-string Murders* by Gypsy Rose Lee. It's a charmer, making burlesque (clean burlesque in this case—comedy, music and dancing) neither glamorous nor too seedy (just seedy enough). Along with personal and professional jealousies that arise (which dominate the picture), we get the mystery itself—and it's not as much a murder mystery as it might seem, although there are a couple of murders, both involving G-strings. (There's also a great song, "Take it off the E string, play it on the G string.") It's distinctly a who-dun-it: Who's trying to shut down the show—or the theatre—and why?

Well written and well acted. I have to downgrade it a little for the print quality: There are gaps at times, which is always disconcerting. Still, it's an enjoyable, well-made picture. $1.25.

Love Affair, 1939, b&w. Leo McCarey (dir.), Irene Dunne, Charles Boyer, Maria Ouspenskaya. 1:27.

A classic. Not a romantic comedy, since there's very little comedy, but a great romantic flick. He (Charles Boyer) is an engaged French playboy. She (Irene Dunne) is an American with a boyfriend. They meet on an ocean liner, share dinner, try to avoid making a scene. There's a great sequence at his grandmother's place—and Maria Ouspenskaya is magnificent in that role.

At the end of the cruise, in New York, she proposes that, if it makes sense for both of them, they'll meet in on July 1 at the top of the Empire State Building and take it from there. Complications ensue—fairly serious complications. There's a happy ending…of sorts. This one's the original. It was remade twice, once by the same director as *An Affair to Remember* (and sleepless people can think of at least one more picture inspired by it).

Great stars, great acting, (Dunne and Ouspenskaya were both up for Oscars, as was the picture), well written (another nomination), well made. This version has two flaws (in addition to the usual VHS-quality print): the soundtrack's a little damaged at points, and there are some fade-to-black breaks that make no sense thematically but might be well timed for advertisements. Even so, I'll give it $1.75.

Letter of Introduction, 1938, b&w. John M. Stahl (dir.), Adolphe Menjoy, Adrea Leeds, George Murphy, Edgar Bergen, Charlie McCarthy, Mortimer Snerd (in a bit part), Ann Sheridan, Eve Arden. 1:44 [1:29].

An unusual movie in several respects. It's a drama—but with Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, as well as Eve Arden. It's romantic—but in an odd way. Adolphe Menjou plays an oft-divorced actor who's been away from the stage for years. Kay (Andrea Leeds) shows up with a letter of introduction—from her mother, letting Menjou know she's his daughter. (The sleeve gets it wrong: He didn't "sever his relationship" with her—he never knew she existed.) As he tries to make things right—but without simply announcing that she's his daughter—complications ensue. What more to say?

Well played, but the print's dirty, there must be some significant gaps and the sound's not all that good. For this copy, no more than $1.25.

Disc 8

The Town Went Wild, 1944, b&w. Ralph Murphy (dir.), Freddie Bartholomew, Jimmy Lydon, Edward Everett Horton, Tom Tully, Jill Browning, Maude Eburne, Jimmy Conlin. 1:17 [1:05]

What dramatic sweep: Incest, infectious diseases, breaking and entering, family feuds, fistfights, two trials… Well, OK, it's a screwball romantic comedy, with emphasis on screwball. The son of one feuding

neighbor runs off with the daughter of the next-door feuding neighbor to elope in a nearby town—with the daughter's brother finding transportation and cover. (The son's on his way to Alaska, for reasons that aren't quite clear. That's important because he needs a copy of his birth certificate. Wait for it. Turns out they can't get married yet: They have to wait three days after the license is issued, and it gets published in the meantime.)

Meanwhile, the clowns at city hall (in the first town) discover that two birth certificates may have been switched—and, in an immediate court hearing, the sons are told they belong with each other's family (there's no proof, but they both have a birthmark that should identify one of them). Which, if you think about it…well, bad enough that the kid would now be marrying his sister (I didn't make up anything in the first sentence), but they conclude they'll all go to prison because of the marriage license. So Steps Must Be Taken…which lead to another trial involving both fathers and their employer. (Measles are involved, not to spoil even more of the plot.)

It's all played with great energy by a talented cast. As presented in this print, it's really too short to be a full-fledged feature, but it *plays* like a brisk screwball comedy without big holes in the plot. The sound track's a little iffy at times, and the video and sound are a bit out of synch. (That happens in some of the movies, but is usually corrected a few minutes in. Not so this time.) Those flaws and the brevity of the film bring a lively screwball comedy down to $1.25.

The Man with the Golden Arm, 1955, b&w. Otto Preminger (dir.), Frank Sinatra, Eleanor Parker, Kim Novak, Arnold Stang, Darren McGavin, Robert Strauss, John Conte, George E. Stone. 1:59.

The real stuff—not the most pleasant movie in the world, but powerful and well acted. Frank Sinatra plays the title role, Frankie Machine, where "golden arm" refers to his skill as an (illegal) poker dealer, his newfound talent as a drummer—and, to be sure, the gold that gets pumped into his arm, one needle at a time.

He gets off the dope and quits the illegal gambling after getting out of treatment—or at least he tries, but his wife (who appears to be wheelchair-bound after an accident he's responsible for) wants him to stick with what he knows. There's a very brief scene midway where it becomes clear that she's faking the physical disability. In some ways, she's more of an enabler than the slick pusher.

Kim Novak plays the girlfriend with heart, brains and determination—and does a superb job, as does Sinatra (who won an Oscar nomination for the role). For that matter, Darren McGavin as the dealer is first rate also. So is Eleanor Parker as the wife.

It's a gritty, well-written, well-acted downer, and a true classic. The plot plays well throughout—as we watch someone get pulled back in to his bad old ways, and eventually go cold turkey in a harrowing sequence. The print's generally good and the sound's good enough to support Elmer Bernstein's first-rate jazz score (another Oscar nomination). I don't know that I'd watch it again, but can't possibly give it less than $2.

High Voltage, 1929, b&w. Howard Higgin (dir.), William Boyd, Carole Lombard, Owen Moore, Phillips Smalley, Billy Bevan, Diane Ellis. 1:03.

An odd title for an odd short flick with a fine cast. The setup requires a fair amount of disbelief: A coach or bus apparently going from Sacramento to Reno during a huge snowstorm. When it stops for gas, the station attendant says they'll never make it through and should stop there, but the blowhard driver says he can make it. Passengers include one banker, one young woman on the way to meet her fiancée and a cop taking a woman (Carole Lombard) back East to serve out a prison sentence. The last two passengers are on their way to catch a train, as is (I believe) the young woman. The film is set in a time when there are not only buses but airplanes—but, apparently, either no train running from Sacramento east or the train's so unreliable that it makes more sense to ride a bus out into a huge snowstorm. I suppose there was such a period, but it's a little implausible.

Naturally, the bus gets stuck. Somehow, it's 40 miles to the nearest city or town—but there's a church close enough so the stranded group can see it and make their way there. Where they find a hobo (William Boyd), who (it turns out) is on the lam. (You may know William Boyd by the character he played in about 70 movies and 40 TV shows starting in 1935: Hopalong Cassidy. He's a lot darker here!)

That's the setup. The hobo has food but probably not enough for the ten days he estimates they'll be trapped (based on nothing obvious). There's jockeying for position, shoving around, threats…and mostly lots of talk and very little of anything else, although the hobo (who pretty much takes command) does manage to push them all out to get some fresh air, leading to two of them falling through ice (and being rescued). The hobo starts to go off in the night with the woman on her way back to prison (he knows of a ranger station ten miles away)—but when a plane starts circling overhead, he can't go through with abandoning the others, and they agree to serve their time and move on from there. (Sorry for the plot spoilers, but there's not much plot here to spoil.)

So I guess it's a drama of tension among half a dozen stranded types. I suppose, but hardly enough tension to justify the title. Reasonably well acted. Some film damage. One real oddity: The opening credits refer to

the characters as archetypes—The Boy, The Girl, The Detective, and so on—even though they all have names in the movie. Knowing the date does make a difference: This is a *very* early talkie. I'll give it $1.

The Hoosier Schoolboy, 1937, b&w. William Nigh (dir.), Mickey Rooney, Anne Nagel, Frank Shields, Edward Pawley, William Gould, Dorothy Vaughan. 1:02.

Ostensibly, this movie's about a kid from the wrong side of the tracks and the new schoolteacher who—after almost being sent packing because she might be a labor agitator—tries to redeem him and his drunken war-hero father. But the plot is equally about a "milk strike," with dairy farmers who worked with a "cooperative" dairy whose owner is now underpricing them under difficult circumstances. Or maybe it's about the new schoolteacher, possibly too spunky for her own good, and the seemingly-playboy son of the dairy owner who wants to make everything right (and win her affection).

That's a lot of plot for a one-hour movie and it didn't feel as though any element was explored very well. If you love Mickey Rooney's tough kid with a heart of gold character, you'll probably like this movie. Between dark video at times, flawed video at other times and a sense that the movie wasn't ready to explore anything very deeply, I didn't find it very satisfactory. $0.75.

I Cover the Waterfront, 1933, b&w. James Cruze (dir.), Ben Lyon, Claudette Colbert, Ernest Torrence, Hobart Cavanaugh, Maurice Black, Purnell Pratt. 1:15 [1:01].

The waterfront reporter promises his editor a big story on Chinese immigrants being smuggled. He winds up with a "bad lead" because the fishing captain involved is so ruthless he'll cheerfully drown an immigrant rather than risk exposure. Eventually, the reporter gets the story through a plot involving romancing the captain's daughter; he also gets shot along the way. There's a side story involving a drunken reporter who turns up in his apartment. Unfortunately, the whole thing seems scattered, possibly because of missing footage. It's not bad, but hardly a classic in this rendition. $1.00.

Disc 9

Penny Serenade, 1941, b&w. George Stevens (dir.), Irene Dunne, Cary Grant, Beulah Bondi, Edgar Buchanan. 1:59 [1:57].

Great stars, a generally good print, good soundtrack—but I found this one disappointing. It's told entirely in flashbacks as Irene Dunne plays records from her "Album of a Happy Marriage" as she's about to walk out the door. Seems Grant, a reporter, meets her while she's working in a music store, romances her, gets sent to Japan and marries her just before leaving. She shows up in Japan, pregnant, and they're happy. He gets a (modest) inheritance and decides to blow the job. A huge earthquake hits, taking away the baby and her ability to have others. So they look into adoption—while he's put his inheritance into a failing weekly paper in a small town. With the help of an adoption-agency person, they do find a baby girl—and somehow manage to keep her, a year later, despite having no source of income. (There's some good domestic comedy along the way—many parts of this film are quite good.) Everything's wonderful…until the girl dies suddenly at age six. And the two seem to have nothing to say to each other, which is why she's leaving.

Enough plot for you? I was wondering how it would end—and the ending, which I assume to be considered a happy one, struck me as a bit creepy. I won't give it away just in case you might see it, but let's say that it doesn't do anything to reassure me that these two have a fundamentally sound marriage. There's an interesting third character, Applejack (played by Edgar Buchanan), who's known them all along—and who somehow manages to stay around the little town (he was hired as press manager and troubleshooter) even though the newspaper's gone under. He does a fine job (hey, he's Edgar Buchanan), as do all the actors. I just found the movie more depressing than uplifting and the ending odd at best. I'll give it $1.25.

Dark Mountain, 1944, b&w. William Berke (dir.), Robert Lowery, Ellen Drew, Regis Toomey, Eddie Quillan. 0:56.

This one's unusual—a combination of noir and comedy wrapped up in a tightly made hour. Basically, you have a forest ranger who disobeys orders to save his horses—and shortly thereafter gets promoted, which means he has the money to pursue his old girlfriend. Who has since gotten married…to a smuggler (Regis Toomey), who shortly thereafter kills two (or three) people and goes on the lam. The rest has to do with hideouts, psychology, the whole thing. Meanwhile, there's another ranger who's basically a funny sidekick (with a wife who's in the military, in Africa—this is set in WWII).

It's well written, well acted and moves nicely. I really have no particular criticism of this flick; it's quite good. The value is based on its short running time—but even so it gets $1.25.

The Big Show, 1936, b&w, Mack V. Wright (dir.), Gene Autry, Smiley Burnette, Kay Hughes, Sally Payne, William Newell, Max Terhune, Sons of the Pioneers, the Jones Boys, the Beverly Hillbillies, the Light Crust Doughboys, Champion, Rex King. 1:10/0:54. [0:55]

[**Note**: This movie also appears in the Classic Musicals set, and this review was done for that copy. The price has been adjusted downward since I no longer

allow more than $1.25 for a one-hour movie.] The plot: Tom Ford's making a movie with Gene Autry as his stuntman. Ford goes on vacation (and to hide out from $10,000 gambling debts) and the studio publicist says he's needed at the Texas World's Fair in Dallas (where most of this was filmed). Solution? Have Gene Autry don a fake mustache and impersonate Tom Ford. But Ford doesn't sing—and that's Autry's big thing. Lots of music, lots of action with the gangster (who decides to blackmail the studio about the Autry-as-Ford thing, which doesn't work well because the studio *loves* having a singing cowboy). Autry wasn't that hot as an actor at the time, but since he was also playing Ford, he acted as well as Ford. More show biz than western, but plenty of music—and the Beverly Hillbillies were a western singing group a long time before the title was used for a TV show. $1.25.

The Joyless Street, 1925, silent, b&w (sepiatone), original title *Die Freudlose Gasse*. Georg Wilhelm Pabst (dir.), Greta Garbo, Werner Krauss, Asta Nielsen and a bunch of others—none of them credited (including Garbo). 2:05 to 2:55 [1:00].

This sepiatone rerelease of a silent movie (with symphonic, entirely unrelated, soundtrack added) leaves no doubt as to *why* it was rereleased: "The incomparable Greta Garbo" with preliminary title cards about getting to see her wonderful mannerisms, etc. When Greta (a character in the movie) first appears, the new title card makes sure you know that Greta is *Greta Garbo!* (Apparently, she wasn't the star in the original film.)

Take away the supposed star power and it's a sad little story of postwar Vienna (The Great War, that is). It starts with a downtrodden family in a flat—the daughter comes back without meat (the butcher doesn't have any) and the father beats her. Then we go upstairs to a flat with a retired civil servant and two daughters (one the fully-grown Greta, the other a subteen girl)—and that's it for the first family: They're never heard from again. Unless the daughter was in the long line overnight at the butcher's for promised "frozen beef tomorrow"—with little enough that most are turned away.

There's almost too much plot to summarize, having to do with the father making incredibly stupid decisions for a retiree ("let's cash out our pension and buy speculative stock *on margin!*"), leering bosses, stock manipulation, cabarets, American relief workers and an ending that feels pulled out of nowhere. Maybe it's the fact that this is somewhere between one-third and one-half of the original film. Maybe it's bad English titles. Without Garbo, I'd say it's a curious little relic, worth maybe $0.75—the print's not too bad. With Garbo—well, she may have been incomparable, but in this movie she just seemed to be overacting and her famed beauty mostly seemed to be huge eyes. I'll stick with $0.75.

Blood and Sand, 1922, silent, b&w. Fred Niblo (dir.), Rudolph Valentino, Rosa Rosanova, Leo White, Lila Lee, Nita Naldi. 1:48 [1:00].

Another silent with unrelated music—but this one's in generally-good black & white, and *every* significant actor is introduced with a title card showing the role and the actor's name, not just the star. (No credits on this one either.) Rudolph Valentino *was* clearly the star in this one—and he doesn't overact and does display a pretty fair amount of magnetism. (Actually, for a silent-movie, he acts fairly subtly.)

The story? If you haven't heard it by now… Poor boy becomes toreador, marries childhood sweetheart, becomes a Very Big Deal, gets seduced by a society type, and all does not go well. Strong anti-bullfighting messages in the titles and one side character. Still a lot missing (20 to 48 minutes), but what's there works reasonably well. Well done for what it is; I'll give it $1.00.

Disc 10

Gold, 1974, color. Peter R. Hunt (dir.), Roger Moore, Susannah York, Ray Milland, Bradford Dillman, John Gielgud, Simon Sabela. Elmer Bernstein, score. 1:59.

Quite a cast and quite a plot. The action's centered in a South African gold mine—but the plot's centered in a secret cabal. The gold mine's separated from a huge body of water by a natural barrier. The cabal figures that, if they could break through that barrier, it would flood not only this mine but the whole district, thus (supposedly) raising the price of gold by 30% and elevating all the other mining stocks. It would ruin this particular company and kill a few hundred miners, but that offers short-sale opportunities (and almost all of the miners are black).

The second-in-command at the gold mine (Dillman in one of his properly villainous roles) is part of the plot. He gets Moore appointed as the new mine manager, figuring he won't ask too many questions when he's told there's *really* more gold on the other side of the barrier—if you just blast through deep enough. But Moore (when he's not seducing or being seduced by the second-in-command's wife, Susannah York) is sharp enough to set up a safety, a second set of explosives to seal off the situation if the "gold on the other side" report turns out to be wrong. Ray Milland plays well as York's grandfather and head of the mining company. Gielgud is part of the cabal—a group nasty enough to blow up one of its members (and family) when he starts to sell off stock too obviously and early.

Lots'o'plot, particularly as the bad guys conspire to make sure the safety can't work. A strong opening sequence in the mines, and a stirring final fifteen mi-

nutes, mostly in rushing water deep in the mine. Generally very good print and sound. Not a great movie, but not a bad two hours either. $1.50.

Home Town Story, 1951, b&w. Arthur Pierson (dir.), Jeffrey Lynn, Donald Crisp, Marjorie Reynolds, Alan Hale Jr., Marilyn Monroe. 1:01.

Man climbs off a plane. Group comes toward him, one of them making a crack about political campaign. Man slugs him. As we find out, this fellow served five years in the Armed Forces, was *immediately* elected to the State Senate and was defeated for reelection by the son of a local manufacturer—and he has a chip on his shoulder the size of a redwood. He's also the nephew of the newspaper owner, who's only too happy to make him editor, and he's going to Tell The Truth About Big Business.

First, he sets out to show that the manufacturer discharges stuff into the stream it's next to—but he's assured that it does no such thing. So instead he starts writing editorials about excess profits and how they hurt the country. His best friend (a reporter) is so disgusted he's about to quit. His long-time fiancée doesn't know what to make of it. An oddly recognizable secretary with a remarkable figure has a few lines. The manufacturer comes in to discuss his theory that corporate profits only happen because of consumer profits—if someone doesn't profit *more* from buying something, they won't buy it.

After the editor laughs the manufacturer out of the office, he gets a phone call: His little sister (?) is trapped in an abandoned mine, there on a school outing. Everybody jumps into action with remarkable speed, flying the little girl to a hospital in the manufacturer's plane—and when she's saved, the manufacturer happens to notice one of his company's motors on some piece of equipment at the hospital. Suddenly enlightened, the editor decides he should really *be* an editor and give up politics, and writes a new editorial about the good side of corporate profits.

But here's the thing. The little girl was in trouble because (a) the for-profit mining company failed to properly shore up and close up the mine when it stopped mining—you know, that would have cost money—and (b) the employees of a for-profit company doing work on what was supposed to be a closed road to the mine didn't take the time to put back the warning sign, and I believe it was the employee who thinks the editor's a troublemaker who couldn't be bothered. So another moral might be "There are good companies and there are bad companies." I don't think that's what General Motors, who apparently commissioned this odd little propaganda piece, had in mind. I'm sure glad we're reassured that responsible companies never, ever dumped chemicals in streams back in the Fifties, though. That's probably why the Cuyahoga has always run sweet and clear. Alan Hale Jr. does a good job as Slim Haskins, the buddy/reporter. Strictly as a curiosity, with an odd little role by Marilyn Monroe (who isn't one of the leads), I'll give it $1.

Meet John Doe, 1941, b&w. Frank Capra (dir.), Gary Cooper, Barbara Stanwyck, Edward Arnold, Walter Brennan, Spring Byington, James Gleason, Gene Lockhart, Rod LaRocque, Regis Toomey. 2:02.

If there's anyone out there who doesn't know the plot of this Frank Capra classic… Big businessman (Edward Arnold) takes over honorable newspaper, turns it into streamlined rag, fires people—including a columnist (Stanwyck) who really needs to work. As her last column, she turns in a phony suicide note from a John Doe who's out of luck, fed up with everything and will jump off City Hall at Christmas. Well…people want to offer John Doe a job and there's a possible circulation booster—so they choose one of many out-of-work people saying they're John Doe, a baseball pitcher named Long John Willoughby (Cooper) who needs surgery to be able to pitch. They put him and his grouchy friend (Walter Brennan, who keeps talking about how Helots will grab you if you don't stay on the bum) up at a hotel, put him on the radio—with speeches she's writing—and soon enough, folks are forming John Doe Clubs and getting to know their neighbors.

Well, naturally, there's evil behind the bossman's helping John Doe Clubs: He wants to turn them into a third party and get elected President, then take over and Run Things Properly. Doe finds out about it but the big man's goons make sure he can't get the word out. Down and out, he's about to make good on the suicide threat he actually never made…and, of course, it all works out.

Sounds a little sappy, but it's not. It's a great cast, well-written, well-directed, well-acted, well worth watching. It's not a wonderful print, but it's not bad, and the movie's a classic. $2.00.

His Private Secretary, 1933, b&w. Phil Whitman (dir.), Evalyn Knapp, John Wayne, Reginald Barlow, Alec B. Francis. 1:00.

A young John Wayne plays the playboy son of a millionaire businessman. The father demands the son take over as collection agent. He goes to a nearby small town to collect a debt, in the process picking up (and offending) a beautiful young girl—who turns out to be the daughter of the near-deaf minister he's supposed to collect the debt from. He winds up forgiving the debt and getting fired for his trouble.

After various shenanigans and his continued ~~stalking~~ attempts to get on the right side of the girl, he succeeds and marries her—but his father assumes she's a

gold-digger and tells him to get rid of her. Somehow, she winds up becoming her father's new private secretary—the best he's ever had—but then leaves town because she thinks the playboy's still a player. Everything works out in the end: This is, after all, a romantic comedy, if a surprisingly short one. Nothing spectacular, but not bad. I'll give it $1.25.

Disc 11

Heartbeat, 1946, b&w. Sam Wood (dir.), Ginger Rogers, Jean-Pierre Aumont, Adolphe Menjou, Melville Cooper, Basil Rathbone. 1:42.

A young woman escaped from reform school shows up at a Paris school for pickpockets, where she seems to be doing well—but when she attempts to lift something, she's caught. The person catching her—an older diplomat--tells her to steal a watch from a young diplomat at a dress ball (or she'll go to prison). She does, notices there's a picture of the older diplomat's wife inside the watch, removes it before giving it to the older diplomat. He tells her to return the watch, which she does—and in the process of the two dances, she and the younger diplomat fall for one another. Maybe.

That's just the beginning of a moderately confused plot involving marriages of conveniences, a variety of con men, trains to and from Geneva…naturally, it all works out in the end. (The sleeve plot description is wrong on several counts, but that's par for the course.) The movie's well filmed and generally well played—but to me, Ginger Rogers seemed more vapid than she needed to be in the star role, seeming not to show much of any emotion or even interest, even when she's crying from happiness. That hurts the picture. So, in the case of this print, do minor visual damage and fairly major sound problems—the sound is frequently distorted, making dialogue a bit difficult to understand. In the end, I come up with $1.25.

He Found a Star, 1941, b&w. John Paddy Carstairs (dir.), Vic Oliver, Sarah Churchill, Evelyn Dall, Gabrielle Brune, J.H. Roberts. 1:29 [1:15].

A British stage manager wants to be more, and with the help of a woman friend (played by Winston Churchill's daughter) starts a small-time talent agency, specifically looking to help out unknown talents. They struggle for some time but eventually build a business of sorts—and he continues to treat her as nothing but a secretary. It all climaxes when he gets a would-be star (who's a reasonable success, and who he wants to propose to) out of multiple "exclusive" contracts, signs her up for a big new show—and finds that she's going to run off to Hollywood.

Naturally, it all works out in the end. In the meantime, the action's constant but the plot's a bit hectic, possibly because of a *lot* of missing footage. To my eye, the various acts were fine (the traditional baritone turned one-man band is a charmer) but the dramatic actors didn't make much impact, and I never got any sense that the secretary desired the talent agent until the last few minutes of the flick, somewhat undermining the dramatic conflict. Given that, a sometimes-damaged print and a sometimes-damaged soundtrack, I'm hard put to give this more than $0.75.

Affair in Monte Carlo (orig. *24 Hours of a Woman's Life*), 1952, color (b&w on this disc). Victor Saville (dir.), Merle Oberon, Leo Genn, Richard Todd. 1:30 [1:04]

Merle Oberon is excellent in this tale of sudden romance and gambling addiction, told mostly as a flashback—but there are two problems. The biggest one is that this seems like "**scenes** from an affair"—at 1:03, it's much far too short for its story and has gaps in continuity. Given the fairly slow pacing of the movie, that's particularly unfortunate. Noting IMDB after rating this, I see that's what's happened: The movie should be 90 minutes long, the U.S. version was trimmed to 75 minutes (why?), and this version—apart from losing its color—is down to a mere 64 minutes.

The other—well, the credits list a Technicolor colour consultant, but there's no color in the movie as presented here. The scenery would be much nicer and the film more convincing in color. It doesn't have the qualities of great b&w cinematography. (Actually, it looks like desaturated color, which is what it apparently is.) Nice little story, good scenery, some good acting, but ultimately I'm generous at $1.00.

The Snows of Kilimanjaro, 1952, color. Henry King (dir.), Gregory Peck, Susan Hayward, Ava Gardner, Hildegard Knef, Leo G. Carroll. 1:54 [1:53].

Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, Susan Hayward. Spectacular scenery, well filmed. Ernest Hemingway. What more could you ask for? Well… Not to speak ill of classics, but this movie seemed a little thin and soapy to me, apart from the starpower and writer's credentials. (On the other hand, it's a Hemingway short story, so maybe it is a little thin for a two-hour flick.) But that may be me. Good print (by and large), although there's ticking on the soundtrack for a few minutes near the end. Even though it isn't quite my cup of tea, it deserves $1.50.

Disc 12

Indiscreet, 1931, b&w. Leo McCarey (dir.), Gloria Swanson, Ben Lyon, Monroe Owsley, Barbara Kent, Arthur Lake, Maude Eburne. 1:32 [1:13]

I'm of two minds on this one. On one hand, it's a nicely done romantic comedy with remarkable comedic turns by Gloria Swanson (particularly when she demonstrates the "slight touch of insanity" in her family), a satisfying overall plot and generally solid

acting. Yes, there's some uneasiness between melodrama and comedy, and the occasional songs seem out of place—but it was fun overall.

On the other, the soundtrack's sometimes damaged enough to be really annoying, and once in a while there's visible damage as well. The missing 19 minutes would probably improve the movie.

Overall, it's a good romantic comedy undone by the print quality, yielding $1.25.

Chandu on the Magic Island, 1935, b&w. Ray Taylor (dir.), Bela Lugosi, Maria Alba. 1:10 [1:06].

This is apparently a sequel to some other movie or movies (or recut episodes of a serial) with Bela Lugosi as Frank Chandler, aka Chandu the Magician. This one involves a Princess Nadji, a yacht, evil crewmen, the lost island of Lemuria, some dark-magic cat-worshiping religion and a proposed sacrifice to reanimate a dead ruler.

I could say the print's damaged in some parts and the sound's questionable. Both of those are true—but I really don't think seeing this one in vivid Technicolor with crystal-clear surround sound and on a big screen would help. It struck me as incoherent even by the standards of Z-grade mystic-"scifi" flicks. (There's no science here, but plenty of fiction.) My charitable quick review: An awful mess, but devoted fans of Bela Lugosi might find something to like. For that, I'll give a reluctant $0.50.

Hell's House, 1932, b&w, Howard Higgin (dir.), Bette Davis, Pat O'Brien, Junior Durkin. 1:12.

Rural kid sees his mother get run over by a car (driver gets out, looks at victim, drives away; kid makes no move to remember license plate or, apparently, call authorities). Next scene: Kid shows up at urban home of aunt & uncle, who have a boarder who acts like a hotshot—and the uncle's out of work. Next scene: Kid asks hotshot if he knows of a job; hotshot, who's actually a bootlegger, hires kid to take phone calls but never say who he works for or where he lives. Next scene—this movie moves *fast*—cops show up, kid won't talk, kid gets sent to reformatory for three years.

Then there's a bunch of reformatory stuff, with a side plot of newspaper reporter trying to blow the lid off the terrible conditions there but not getting cooperation. Kid's best buddy, another kid with a heart condition, tries to smuggle letter out for kid, gets caught, won't snitch, goes to solitary, where the ticker goes worse. Kid knows this, busts out (in the outgoing garbage), pleads with hotshot to help. Despite hotshot's not actually knowing anybody, he manages to get in to see the reporter, kid tells story…and, as the cops arrive, the bootlegger finally develops a heart and signs a confession. After which, of course, the reformatory gets cleaned up (the kid doesn't go back). Oh, his friend dies.

Pat O'Brien's the hotshot. Bette Davis is his girlfriend, who suspects he's mostly a blowhard. Incidentally, the plot summary on the sleeve gets it badly wrong, having the kid escape because the hotshot Kelly is seeing too much of the kid's girlfriend—but the kid doesn't *have* a girlfriend in the movie.

All a little too formulaic—and maybe it doesn't matter in this case. While the print's so-so visually, the soundtrack is so scratchy that I almost gave up on it several times. I can't imagine most sane people would ever listen all the way through. Given that, it can't earn more than $0.50.

The Evil Mind (or *The Clairvoyant*), 1934, b&w. Maurice Elvey (dir.), Claude Rains, Jane Baxter, Athole Stewart. 1:21 [1:08].

Maximus works as a stage clairvoyant, using his wife's clues to say what she's holding—until, in the presence of another woman, he suddenly makes a *real* and correct prediction. This happens a couple of times; he gets a big London stage engagement but the producer's unhappy because he can't do big predictions to order. Meanwhile, his wife's becoming jealous of the young woman. This all leads up to his unwilling prediction of a tunneling catastrophe—one that, when it comes true, causes him to be put on trial on the basis that his prediction *caused* the catastrophe.

There's little point in saying more about the plot. It's not bad, actually, and there's a nice twist involving *why* he only makes accurate predictions under certain circumstances. The print is jumpy at points, 13 minutes are missing and the soundtrack's damaged at points as well, but not so much as to ruin the picture. It's generally well-acted. While the sleeve lists Fay Wray (the wife) as the "legend," I'd say Claude Rains' faintly bizarre and very well played Maximus deserves more credit. The original title ("The Clairvoyant") suits this better, as there's nothing evil in Rains' predictions. I'll give it $1.00.

Summing Up

So how does the whole set work out?

The excellent short list ($2.00): *Good News, The Man with the Golden Arm, Meet John Doe*. Also very fine or pretty good: *Second Chorus*, *A Walk in the Sun*, *The Most Dangerous Game*, *Borderline*, *Carnival Story*, *Love Affair*, *Gold*, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*.

Eleven out of 50—not bad, given that 19 more scored $1.25 (possibly worth seeing again). That's 60% of the flicks. Another 14 are so-so at $1.00, leaving five more trouble to watch than they were worth ($0.75 and below). Only one was an utter loser ($0.25) and none earned the "totally worthless" $0

rating. I come up with $59.75 for this $12-$15 set—or $42 for 30 movies possibly worth watching again.

Retrospective

Pointing with Pride Part 10

Here it is: The final roundup. Now that I know there was one more issue than I've been counting (no, that doesn't include the phantom issue)…maybe I'll get it right by issue 150 (if there is an issue 150). Or maybe not. (This **is** Whole Issue 111—the right number, I think. There is no issue that *shows* Whole Issue 110 in the masthead.)

August 2001: Number 10

Once in a while, somebody gets all excited about the Kindle or Sony Reader and claims it will *replace* print books—but most people involved with ebooks these days make no such grandiose and, frankly, absurd claims. That hasn't always been the case…as in these segments of a long EBOOK WATCH section (edited slightly):

> ***Slate*'s eBook Reader**
>
> We already know that Microsoft wants to push ebooks—particularly those using Microsoft Reader technology and locked to Windows CE or Windows devices. *Slate* generally reads as a lightweight-but-interesting magazine of politics and culture (sort of a *New Republic/National Review* for people with short attention spans)—but once in a while, the Microsoft connection comes through loud and clear. That's certainly true for *Slate*'s eBookClub. I'm still not sure whether Justin Driver's new occasional column falls into that category.
>
> The April 10 column was mentioned indirectly in an earlier roundup. "The eLitists vs. the eBook" attempts to undermine criticism of ebooks. Driver starts by drawing parallels between attacks on ebooks and early attacks on paperback books. He belittles Harold Bloom and anyone who dislikes reading from the screen: "Whippersnappers—and folks who know how to type—don't mind reading some things on computer screens." …While some attacks on ebooks are, admittedly, hyperbolic, most such attacks don't fail truth tests as badly as this passage from Driver's column:
>
> > Who exactly is attacking books? Even the most ardent of eBook enthusiasts don't believe that electronic books will ever completely replace the printed word. eBookers mean to supplement the world of printed books, not subsume it.
>
> Either Driver leads a life so sheltered that he ought not to be writing this column, or he's lying. I've cited a few flat-out assertions that printed books will (or at least *should)* die; I've read quite a few more. Go to the eBookWeb section of this article; tell me that these true believers don't expect eBooks to subsume the world of printed books…
>
> **EBookWeb: Pressing the Faith**
>
> Justin Driver, meet Wade Roush and Glenn Sanders—creators of eBookWeb and former editors of the defunct eBookNet. Go back, read the quoted paragraph above ("Who exactly is…"), then read this:
>
> > We're dedicated to the proposition that someday, all text will be created and shared digitally. When that day comes, so will an explosion in learning, literacy, and creativity. … Eventually, Internet-enabled advanced display devices will allow society to move decisively beyond the archaic, environmentally unsustainable method of ink-on-paper printing, giving wing to any kind of written information that calls for freshness, interactivity, portability, or wide and inexpensive distribution.
>
> "eBookers mean to supplement the world of printed books, not subsume it." Not these clowns…
>
> An "eBook Technology Basics" page [on eBookWeb] includes all the usual nonsense—books kill trees, books are heavy and expensive, while ebooks "can be stored and transmitted at virtually zero cost" and are such an obvious choice "from both an economic and environmental perspective…that one might be tempted to predict that all books will soon be published and [sic] electronically." While the page does admit—reluctantly—that no existing ebook appliance matches the quality of paper books, it's just a matter of time. And, to be sure, "There is plenty for both the early adopter and the average tech-friendly reader to like about the current crop of eBook gadgets." I'm not sure what "tech-friendly reader" means. I make my living through technology, but I won't accept grossly degraded readability simply because it represents "higher" technology…
>
> If you're a true believer, www.ebookweb.com is probably already on your favorites list. Otherwise, I can only recommend it for those who "still believe in the revolutionary potential of eBooks" and the eventual death of "archaic, environmentally unsustainable" print.

As far as I can tell, eBookWeb briefly reappeared as ebookweb.org—then put up a message saying it was moving to a dynamic database and you'd be sent there automatically. That message is the only thing I find on the Wayback Machine after late 2001…and if you go to eBookWeb.org, you get a message saying "eBookWeb rides again!" and "For further information, contact Jon Noring" (with Noring's name a mail link). I've seen lean websites before, but this is ridiculous… (www.ebookweb.com is now a linkpage)

Early Spring 2002: Number 20

Here's an odd one, the lead portion of TRENDS AND QUICK TAKES—noting that I didn't start *Walt at Random* until April 1, 2005, three years after this:

> **To Blog or Not to Blog**
>
> OK, I'm guilty: I wrote an article about Weblogs as part of a cluster of *American Libraries* articles on the circle of gifts, and I rely on a dozen or so Weblogs to point to items for commentary in *Cites & Insights*. On the other hand, I don't do a Weblog—and almost all the Weblogs I check regularly are atypical, according to the Blogging stories I've been seeing lately. That is, a majority of Weblogs appear to be online diaries of a sort; most of those I check are focused sets of library-related links, sometimes annotated, rather than extended mirrors for the creators. I have no idea what Blake Carver (or other contributors) ate for breakfast on March 12, but LISNews almost always points me to one or two worthwhile sources each week.
>
> I was reminded of that distinction—that most Weblogs are much more personal (and self-oriented) than the ones I monitor—by a charming *Wired News* piece by Farhad Manjoo, posted February 18, 2002: "Blah, blah, blah and blog." Manjoo notes the strongest indication that Weblogs are now mainstream: NPR ran a piece on them. And there have been stories all over the place. This piece says that Weblogs have now crossed a "tipping point"…with Evan Williams of Blogger saying there are "a million different kinds of weblogs." A later estimate is that there may be half a million Weblogs in all, so Williams' comment on variety may be hyperbolic…
>
> Here's what I found peculiar about the *Wired News* piece: comments from Dave Winer. Somehow, he seems to think that *everyone* should be building Weblogs—that they are social goods of some sort. He's not the only one. "Asked if he'd like to live in a world where virtually everyone blogs, Williams chuckled and said, 'Yeah, I think it would be a great thing. It's not that you want to read them. But people have the desire to express themselves, and I think it's tremendously powerful activity. If you write everyday, your writing improves, your thinking improves.'" I'm not sure I can buy that as a general proposition—and I am sure that most good writing is something more than spur of the moment jottings.

Some things never change, for example John Dvorak belittling most other people—and some people thinking *everybody* should be blogging.

January 2003: Number 30

October 2002 to December 2008 (when I'm writing this) is a little over six years. So this TRENDS & QUICK TAKES item giving us a sure-fire five-year projection from October 2002 should be a reality check of sorts:

> **Rollup Video Screens**
>
> The October 2002 *EMedia* includes a three-page "Industry News" piece from Mark Fritz based largely on information from Universal Display Corporation. The firm is "on the forefront of OLED technology development" and VP Janice Mahon says we'll see all sorts of wonderful things in just five years—"a video screen so small and flexible that it rolls up inside a pen," "glowing wallpaper that turns entire walls into illumination sources," "flexible video screens that fit in shirt cuffs" or are embedded in car windshields—and, of course, the ever-promised video walls and refreshable daily newspapers.
>
> Mahon admits that current OLED screens "aren't bright enough or big enough" to compete with projection systems and current display technologies. Her guess is three to five years. Meanwhile, OLED is turning up in some small devices—and the vaunted low power consumption isn't a whole lot better than backlit LCD.
>
> Fritz assures us that video walls "will be here tomorrow." Maybe, and OLED certainly has some advantages over attempts to scale LCD (for example). But there's at least some reason to wonder about timing. In a field where "two years" means "we think we have a working prototype, and in two to ten years it might reach market," a five-year projection suggests that the industry has no idea how to solve some fundamental problems. Watch and wait; it could be great or it might never happen.

Video screen that rolls up inside a pen, as a consumer product: I missed that one. Glowing wallpaper that turns entire walls into illumination sources: Hmm…Nope, haven't seen it. "Flexible video screens that fit in shirt cuffs." Not on any shirts in our local stores. Video walls and refreshable daily newspapers—well, the latter, sort of, but not in a newspaper's form factor. Video walls? I suppose, if you have a wall painted white and aim a projector at it, but that's not what this item was about.

In fact, there *is* one OLED TV on the market, and it is apparently a superlative device. It also costs $2,500 and has a 12" screen—only a video wall if you're building a dollhouse.

OLED may yet be great. I hope so. So far, it's still a couple of years away as serious TV competition ("a couple" means "anywhere from one to infinity").

September 2003: Number 40

Remember the relatively recent "Bloggers' Code" brouhaha? That wasn't the first time that a set of stan-

dards for blogs was proposed. Here's part of PERSPECTIVE: WEBLOGGING: A TOOL, NOT A MEDIUM:

> A mini-tempest has sprung up recently *on* a few weblogs *about* weblogging—specifically, whether there is or should be a set of standards for how weblogs are maintained. There's nothing new about weblogs spending too much time on weblogging—that seems endemic to the "blogosphere." This one's a little different, and watching the controversy reminded me of a theme from my abandoned media book:
>
> > Most of what we think of as individual media are actually clusters of related media, and it damages our understanding of a medium to clump related media together.
>
> **The Controversy**
>
> One of the great people and divas of the weblog world has a habit of changing and deleting entries in their weblog, not just to correct spelling errors but to change the substance of the entry. This hotshot (call them Blogger A) is also known for being argumentative and draws a lot of feedback—which, of course, can be made to seem foolish when the log entry being commented on suddenly changes or disappears.
>
> Another member of the blogerati (Blogger B) took Blogger A to task for post-facto changes—and went so far as to propose a rulebook or code of practice for weblogs. I happened upon Blogger B's entry, thought about it, and chose not to print it out and comment on it here. A number of people seconded Blogger B's notion and expanded on it. Various sets of policies and rulebooks appeared here and there—either policies for a single weblog or proposed policies for webloggers as a group.
>
> More recently, Blogger C (a long-time friend) offered a distinctive essay suggesting that a rulebook for weblogs was a Really Bad Idea. Blogger C doesn't believe it makes sense to think of all webloggers as a group—and Blogger C finds the idea of a single rulebook for bloggers artificial.
>
> I'm sure there have been dozens (more likely hundreds or thousands) of other threads on this controversy in other weblogs. For all I know, it may have been slashdotted. One characteristic of zillions of weblogs and widespread "blogrolling," and people gathering up hundreds or thousands of weblog entries via RSS, is that notions (memes, ideas, silliness, what have you) spread across the Internet with a speed that makes wildfire look sluggish….
>
> If there's a rulebook for weblogs, you get one of two undesirable results:
>
> - There's no way to enforce the rules (because no value has been added), but those who choose to ignore them are treated by self-appointed Keepers of the Blogosphere as outsiders and malefactors, *regardless* of the content or quality of their weblogs.
> - There *are* ways to enforce the rules, at which point innovation in weblogs begins to cease. New weblogs are nothing but new instances of existing weblog varieties. That's true of most new weblogs already, but you do see truly original ideas at times. That's less likely once there's a rulebook.
>
> I think that's enough reason to oppose a rulebook for weblogs. Another killer reason is related to my theme above. Weblogs are no more one medium than print serials are one medium, possibly even less so. Weblogging is a tool (or set of tools). Those tools are used to create many different media; all those media have in common is:
>
> - They're on the internet
> - They consist of chunks for which the default access is reverse chronological, last in, first out.
>
> I can't think of any other characteristic that's true of all weblogs, unless you begin the vile process of drawing circles to keep people out. "Well, that's not *really* a weblog, because [it doesn't have links] [the essays are too long] [it's only updated once a week] [there's no comment function]…"

June 2004: Issue 50

Most of this issue was devoted to open access. But I included this section in BIBS & BLATHER:

> **It May Not Be My Fight, But…**
>
> Boy, do I not want to write this section in some ways. I stand to lose readers as a result and I can't imagine that I'll gain any readers or friends (my few close friends already know where I stand). I could lose speaking opportunities. I should just let it be.
>
> After all, it may not be my fight. I'm a middle-aged white man, straight, politically moderate, married to a wonderful woman for more than 26 years, with no intention of changing that status.
>
> But here it is. And, come to think of it, maybe it is my fight.
>
> I'm happily married. I'm heterosexual. We were married in a church.
>
> And for the life of me, I cannot see any way to interpret the marriage of two adults who love one another as doing anything other than *strengthening* marriage, as long as the two adults are both competent to make that commitment. Those marriages do nothing to weaken my marriage in particular, and (I believe) a lot to strengthen marriage in general.
>
> Before you blow your stack, note that I would have no problem with "marriage" being something that's done entirely by religious organizations—as long as government replaces it with some other form of

commitment that has the 1,100+ perquisites that currently exist for married couples, *and only for married couples*. Get government entirely out of marriage (that is, the rite and agreement with that particular name), and I have no problem. Of course, neither do same-sex couples: Any number of ministers in Metropolitan churches, Unitarian Universalist congregations, and other faiths will be only too happy to wed two men or two women who are committed to one another. Would my wife and I still have a church wedding? Hard to say.

"It's for the children." Hogwash.

I don't remember any questionnaire when we went to get a marriage license, asking us whether we intended to have children. We don't have them, and won't. Should our marriage be annulled?

My father remarried at age 89 to a wonderful 91-year-old woman. I suspect there was never any possibility of those two having children—and that wasn't a bar to their getting married.

"For the children" means that any person who's infertile, either by choice or by chance, should be barred from marriage.

"The Bible says…" Well, for one thing, freedom *of* religion only works if there's also freedom *from* religion, and the government currently provides all those perquisites to married couples. Thus, marriage has to be considered a secular union. Don't push Biblical attitudes toward right and wrong too far. There's at least one passage in the Bible that appears to praise drunken incest (Genesis 19:30-38), and certainly more than one case of polygamy without condemnation.

I also take into account that the case I'm most personally acquainted with: Two wholly-committed people were able to get married in San Francisco before the courts temporarily stopped a peaceful and loving process. That couple includes one woman who's a military veteran and considerably more religious and conservative than I'll ever be, and another woman who's a minister and presumably understands the Bible fairly well.

Was Gavin Newsom legally right? I don't know. (I know he surprised a lot of people, given that he's a happily married businessman who's relatively conservative by SF standards. But then, it took Richard Nixon to open U.S. relations with China.) Was he morally right? I believe so. I won't comment on "Ax Handle Romney" or other players in this ongoing drama (if you don't get the reference, you're younger than I am). I was fascinated by an article in today's San Francisco *Chronicle*, filed from South Boston, that suggests people there aren't terribly concerned about Massachusetts' legalization of gay marriage—and that some "family" groups are getting desperate because "two years might not be long enough to show that gay marriage undermines marriage." For once, I agree with the "family" people: I suspect two *centuries* of gay marriage won't be long enough to show that it undermines the institution of marriage!

Semi-reformed slutty "virgins" getting "married" for two days to have a good ol' time with an old boyfriend may weaken the institution of marriage. People on their 6th and 7th marriage may weaken the institution. Fifty percent divorce rates may weaken the institution. Or, in all those cases, it may not. *Everyone* who cheats on their spouse weakens the institution, as does every man who believes his spouse is some sort of slave and lesser being.

Loving couples where both are men or both are women? Couples who have been together for decades (four of them, in the first San Francisco ceremony)? These couples strengthen marriage as an institution. They also strengthen society and help to undo a long-standing wrong.

If you find that so disagreeable that you'll never read *Cites & Insights* (or anything else I write) again—well, that's your privilege. Don't let the door hit you on your way out.

The state of civilization in Massachusetts? Still just fine, as far as I can tell. Connecticut? Doing OK. My views on this subject? Haven't changed.

March 2005: Actual Issue 61

The best piece in this issue is PERSPECTIVE: THE DANGLING CONVERSATION. I can see no way to offer a meaningful excerpt. **Go read it**. I'll wait.

December 2005: Actual Issue 71

Two big chunks on the Open Content Alliance and Google Library Project—and yes, I do need to put together comments on Google Book Search and the deal Google made with publishers to end their lawsuit. But that's another story for another issue…

August 2006: Actual Issue 81

Except for a brief BIBS & BLATHER (the central portion of which feels sad now), this entire issue is one PERSPECTIVE: LOOKING AT LIBLOGS: THE GREAT MIDDLE.

I believe it was a landmark study. It also set the groundwork for the *real* landmark study of liblogs, *The Liblog Landscape 2007-2008: A Lateral Look*. Naturally, I hope many of you will buy that book!

June 2007: Actual Issue 91

Just the first part of a section I'm reasonably proud of…ON BEING WRONG:

Have you ever been wrong?

That's a silly question. Of course you have. So have I. We all have. You've been misinformed. You've miscalculated. You've learned better. However you want to say it, you've been wrong.

Admitting error

Here's a tougher question:

Have you ever *admitted* being wrong? You can think about that question on several levels:

- Admitting it to yourself.
- Admitting it privately.
- Admitting it publicly.
- Admitting it when it matters—when you were wrong about something more important than the likelihood of rain or the 17th digit of pi.

I'd like to think the answer's also **Yes** there on all counts. It is for me. But I suspect the answer for some people is **No**, at least on the third and fourth counts.

I posted "Never being wrong" on November 16, 2005, lamenting John Dvorak's refusal to admit that he was wrong in calling Creative Commons "eye-rolling dumb" and "dangerous." Quoting my post:

> Well…someone called him on it, explained how difficult it is to voluntarily reduce your copyright rights (particularly without abandoning them altogether), and so on. And here I quote Donna Wentworth's October 28 post at *Copyfight*:
>
> > So will Dvorak write another column admitting that he was wrong? Not so fast. Explains Dvorak: "My column was never wrong, my column was questioning….I was saying 'I don't get it, will somebody explain it to me, please?'…Sometimes you've got to go public with your bafflement, which I do…"
>
> Isn't that wonderful? You can attack something outright, call it nonsense, belittle it, and so on–and as long as you include at least one question somewhere–"What is this all about anyway?" should do as an all-purpose question–*you never have to admit you're wrong.* You were "questioning."
>
> Right. Before, I was beginning to regard Dvorak as frequently nonsensical and getting tired. Now, I regard him as a hypocritical jerk, too full of himself and his bafflegab to even admit that he was flat-out wrong, damaging Creative Commons to an audience of more than a million people.

That post was cited in a May 3, 2007 post by Anil Dilawri, who noted something strange after Microsoft posted better-than-expected earnings:

> An analyst admitted that they were wrong. WRONG! Not only did the analyst admit it, he mentioned that he was wrong in the title of his research report…
>
> ...I, for one, have seen many analysts over the years "be wrong," and in many cases "be very wrong," and in a few cases "be disgracefully wrong." Never have I seen an analyst admit it, say it, and own it.

Dilawri notes the nature of financial analysts—they never admit they've miscalculated, never use the term "we were wrong," come up with feeble excuses "that usually blame something (or someone) other than their analysis." It's an interesting post that prompted me to write about being wrong.

Failure to admit error: Egotism or cowardice?

I've read comments about people who never admit to being wrong. The usual idea is that it's a sign of extreme egotism. That's probably true, although I'd suggest it's a warped sort of egotism. If you're so unsure of yourself that you can't admit to error lest it diminish your stature, you're in bad shape.

Something else may be happening when someone's incapable of admitting error publicly: Cowardice. Failure to take responsibility for your own thinking and your own errors. That's evidenced by finding all sorts of reasons you weren't really wrong, something else was wrong. In the worst cases of ego and cowardice, people with power try to remake the world rather than admit error, no matter how much money and how many lives are lost as a result.

There's nothing wrong with being wrong from time to time. That's one way we learn—by making mistakes. It's better if you're wrong on issues that aren't matters of life and death. There is something *very* wrong with never being wrong or being incapable of publicly admitting you were wrong…

February 2008: Actual Issue 100

No comment required: Too recent.

Masthead

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