Cites & Insights

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

Perspective

Writing about Reading 3

The theme for this issue may be **rethinking books** and **rethinking reading**—which means it's time to discuss ebooks and ebook readers. Not *just* ebooks and ebook readers, but it's fair to say that the first ebook readers with sales in the hundreds of thousands have kindled (sorry) lots of discussion about the connections among device, format, text and reader.

Beliefs and Biases

In case you're not familiar with my beliefs in this area, a few key points:

- I do not believe print books and the long narrative form are endangered—not by aliteracy, not by attention deficit preference, certainly not by ebooks.
- I believe, and have long said, that ebooks and ebook readers can and should have substantial markets where they can do the job better than print books, without necessarily displacing the majority of print books.
- I regard "inevitable" as a nonsensical and damaging argument. It isn't "inevitable" that print books will disappear because digital transmission is cheaper. It's never been inevitable that a new medium entirely displaces an older medium. I also have a simple reaction when someone dismisses any questioning of new technology or changes on the basis that such questioning has, *sometimes*, been wrong in the past. That argument isn't an argument; it's sloganeering.
- I don't have a horse in this race. I buy few print books, and most of those I do buy are mass-market paperbacks. If people *decide* they prefer ebooks, more power to them. (I read quite a few library books, in print form. I don't travel enough to be a target customer for ebook readers.)
- I also don't believe long-form narrative is inherently superior for all purposes; in fact, I'm certain it isn't. I do believe book-length fiction and nonfiction continue to be important as one element of reading and media, and that long-form narrative is an unusually good way to communicate difficult and subtle topics.

Now, on to some of what's being said and how I think it might fit together. But first…

Facetiæ

Robert Lanham contributed a charmer at *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* in the form of an "Internet-age writing syllabus and course overview": **ENG 371WR: Writing for Nonreaders in the Postprint Era** (www.mcsweeneys.net/2009/4/20lanham.html). Excerpts from this visionary piece:

Inside This Issue

> As print takes its place alongside smoke signals, cuneiform, and hollering, there has emerged a new literary age, one in which writers no longer need to feel encumbered by the paper cuts, reading, and excessive use of words traditionally associated with the writing trade. Writing for Nonreaders in the Postprint Era focuses on the creation of short-form prose that is not intended to be reproduced on pulp fibers…
>
> Students will acquire the tools needed to make their tweets glimmer with a complete lack of forethought, their Facebook updates ring with self-importance, and their blog entries shimmer with literary pithiness. All without the restraints of writing in complete sentences. w00t! w00t!
>
> Throughout the course, a further paring down of the Hemingway/Stein school of minimalism will be emphasized, limiting the superfluous use of nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, conjunctions, gerunds, and other literary pitfalls.

Prerequisites include "Early 21st-Century Literature: 140 Characters or Less," "Advanced Blog and Book Skimming" and "Internet-Age Surrealistic Narcissism and Self-Absorption." A few of the weekly topics:

> **Week 2: Printing words isn't good for the environment**. Students will evaluate why, as BuzzMachine founder Jeff Jarvis articulates, "Paper is where words go to die."…
>
> **Week 4: The Kindle Question**. Is Amazon's wireless reading device the Segway of handheld gadgets? Should it be smaller, come with headphones, and play MP3s instead of display book text?
>
> **Week 6: 140 Characters or Less**. Students will acquire the tools needed to make their tweets come alive with shallow wit…
>
> **Week 8: New Rules**. Students will analyze the publishing industry and learn how to be more innovative than the bards of yesteryear. They'll be asked to consider, for instance, Thomas Pynchon. How much more successful would *Gravity's Rainbow* have been if it were two paragraphs long and posted on a blog beneath a picture of scantily clad coeds?..

There's more great stuff, including the RBBEAW (raised by Boomers, everyone's a winner) grading system, with six grades from A+ down to A----. On the other hand, the syllabus is 1,310 words long—which, for someone acing Week 6, means "TL;DR" (too long, didn't read).

Tim writes a book

That's actually the title of the rejoinder—a same-day comment based on Tim O'Reilly's grandiosely-titled April 29, 2009 post, "Reinventing the Book in the Age of the Web" (radar.oreilly.com/2009/04/reinventing-the-book-age-of-web.html). The post isn't facetious (apparently); the rejoinder almost certainly is.

O'Reilly waxes enthusiastic about the "turning point" marked by the Kindle and Stanza, but he regards putting books onto electronic devices as "a lot like pointing a camera at a stage play, and calling it a movie." He notes the innovations in movie making since filmed plays and credits YouTube with "pushing the envelope even further." Now it's time to **reinvent the book**. Not "add another option to the many forms of books," but *reinvent the book*.

> In our work at O'Reilly as authors and publishers, we've long been interested in exploring how the online medium changes the presentation, narrative and structure of the book, not just its price or format.

What's his big experiment? *The Twitter Book*—"authored in powerpoint."

> The web has changed the nature of how we read and learn. Most books still use the old model of a sustained narrative as their organizational principle. Here, we've used a web-like model of standalone pages, each of which can be read alone (or at most in a group of two or three), to impart key points, highlight interesting techniques or the best applications for a given task. Because the basics are so easy, there's no need to repeat them, as so many technical books do. Instead, we can rely on the reader to provide (much of) the implicit narrative framework, and jump right to points that they might not have thought about.

He also wanted speed, and plans to update the book with each printing. Since he loves PPT and "pictures as visual bullets," why not just publish a PowerPoint presentation? There's a lot more here about how wonderfully O'Reilly has done modularity in the past, throwing in things like "crowdsourcing" and criticizing others (and, a little bit, himself) for not making online books more weblike.

The result: a 240-page slightly undersized trade paperback, full color, with lots of Twitter screen shots and, based on the 40-page preview at the URL above, not too much text. $20 from O'Reilly (or $16 for the ebook), less from Amazon.

Reinventing the book? O'Reilly's never been known for modest ambitions. He wasn't the first to create a book using PowerPoint, according to one comment. Lots of comments, as you'd expect. One notes that *not* being weblike—"the absence of links and collaborative noise"—is a strength of printed books (for some kinds of content). Another notes that "the old model of a sustained narrative" is exactly *why* people like his books. There's plenty of cheerleading.

I'm not saying this form doesn't make sense *for this book*—it might indeed. Not that there haven't been loads of books in the past with little choppy chapters that could be read independently, even if they weren't created using PowerPoint. It's hard to take "reinventing the book" seriously, though.

Nicholas Carr had a little fun with *The Twitter Book* in the April 29, 2009 *Rough type* post whose title appears as a subheading above (www.roughtype.com/) The piece begins:

> Tim wrote a book. The title of Tim's book is The Twitter Book. Tim didn't use a pen to write his book. Tim didn't even use a word processor to write his book. Tim used PowerPoint to write his book. Tim wrote his book very fast, as fast, he says, as he writes "a new talk." There are pictures in Tim's book. Pictures, Tim says, "are a memorable, entertaining way to tell a story."

Another couple of excerpts (it's not a long post):

> Tim's book is a lot easier to read, too. "Most books still use the old model of a sustained narrative as their organizational principle," Tim says. Tim's book uses "a modular structure." Following "a sustained

> narrative" is hard… I like the web. I'm glad that books are going to be more like the web. I'm glad that Tim wrote a book.

The third comment is from Tim O'Reilly, and seems to be a mix of amusement and irritation.

> I am Tim, and I found this very funny too.
>
> Of course, it's always easier to criticize than to do.
>
> I've written lots of books in my time, lots of different ways, for different purposes. You pick the hat to fit the head…

At least one other commenter clearly *was* irritated, failing to see the humor. A second, longer comment from O'Reilly puts down some traditional books as "just inflated blog posts" but also raises interesting questions. Read the set of comments, including those who are amused and those who are outraged.

Ebook Topics

Some of these notes venture into the connections between ebooks and reading or the ways ebooks might change books, also dealt with in the next section. Others deal with other aspects of ebook readers and ebooks in general. For straightforward discussions of dedicated ebook readers, how people like them and how they work in libraries, I'll point you to the Library Leadership Network (pln.lyrasis.org/), where I've assembled and continue to update a growing cluster of ebook-related articles.

Costs of the books

David Crotty posted "The cost of e-books" on February 11, 2009 at *Bench Marks* (normally a blog about "methods used in the biology laboratory," www.cshblogs.org/cshprotocols/). He links to a February 9, 2009 post from Bob Miller of HarperStudio, "Why e-books cost money to publish" (theharperstudio.com/):

> There seems to be a common refrain in many discussions of e-books, the idea that publishers should charge next to nothing for e-books because it doesn't cost publishers much to produce them. This reflects a lack of understanding of a publisher's costs. The cost of manufacturing a book is only the final cost in an extensive process. Whether a book is printed on paper and bound or formatted for download as an e-book, publishers still have all the costs leading up to that stage. We still pay for the author advance, the editing, the copyediting, the proofreading, the cover and interior design, the illustrations, the sales kit, the marketing efforts, the publicity, and the staff that needs to coordinate all of the details that make books possible in these stages. **The costs are primarily in these previous stages; the difference between physical and electronic production is minimal**. In fact, the paper/printing/binding of most books costs about $2.00…so if we were to follow the actual costs in establishing pricing, a $26.00 "physical" book would translate to a $24.00 e-book. [Emphasis added.]

At least one commenter called this "a load of BS" based on Amazon's $9.99 price for ebooks. Miller responded that Amazon's *losing money* on some of those books, presumably to establish a market. Since the commenter mentions shipping as an issue, Miller notes: "the cost of shipping a physical book is usually about 20-25 cents per copy." He also comes up with a publisher's profit on a typical $25 hardbound of $4.50—but that doesn't include the publisher's overhead. Another commenter thinks ebooks should be much cheaper—mostly by *eliminating jobs* (bookstores and distributors). Yet another brings up "scarcity economics" and seems to believe ebooks would sell enormously greater number of copies—stating the potential market for *any single eBook* as "conservatively measured in the millions."

Several people get it right, I think: The assertion that ebooks should cost almost nothing is frequently based on the "gravy theory"—they're just extras on top of print copies, with the print book amortizing all the actual costs. One lengthy argument for cheaper ebooks makes *precisely* that assumption—the costs have already been incurred (and, apparently, ebook sales never reduce cloth sales), so why not sell the ebooks cheaply? Several commenters railed against old thinking or talked about the bloated expenses of publishers—or used the "if you don't make it cheap, someone else will eat your lunch" argument. It's quite possible Miller overstates his case—but the truth is likely to be somewhere between his $22 ebook and the $3 ebooks that would supposedly sell by the millions. (As at least one comment noted, *attention* is not and never will be an infinite resource—I'm not going to read or buy 100 or even 10 books a week, no matter how cheap they are.)

An author adds another interesting note on the concept of turning out $3 ebooks to tap the supposedly infinite demands:

> If we cheapen the novel so that it is commonplace and worth a mere three dollars a book what incentive do I have as a writer to perfect my craft? None. That's how much. I would have called it done a year ago when it was in a decent form–good enough to allow my writing friends to read, anyway. But the novel now after another year of careful revision is worth much more than three dollars a copy… The choice of novels to download will only be as good as the writers and publishers make them to be. If you want a three dollar book, we're going to put in the effort that equals that three dollars. You'll get what you pay for.

Crotty's comment, in part:

> The common mistake appears to be, at least in my experience, that people start with the assumption that an e-book costs nothing to make—you've already paid for everything with the print version, and converting those files to an e-book costs nothing or very little. But every e-book copy you sell means one less print copy you're going to sell, so the total cost of production has to be amortized out over both the e-book and the print version.

Yes and maybe. The first sentence is right on the money—but there's considerable controversy over the second, at least as long as print copies continue to exist. For some authors and some books, ebooks, even at the price of $0, clearly *have not* ruined print book sales. For others? It's too early to tell. Chances are there's partial displacement but not one-for-one displacement. Still, if there's *any* displacement then the cost of production (other than production costs directly associated with print copies) need to be spread over ebook and print versions.

"switchu" posted "Book cost analysis—cost of physical book publishing" on May 3, 2009 at *Kindle2 review* (ireaderreview.com/). It's a long post related to the controversy over Kindle book prices, saying we need "a listing of the costs involved in producing and selling a physical book" and the costs of distributing and selling Kindle Edition ebooks. The writer asserts that the post "covers" the first need. It's a *long* post—a print preview comes to seven pages (plus another five pages of comments)—and, while interesting, certainly not conclusive. You may find it worth reading. Or you may not, since the conclusions are predictable from the name of the blog—"Kindle Edition books and Kindle DTP are going to destroy the current model of publishing." Oddly, although the extent to which a few big publishers and distributors dominate traditional booksellers is cited as a problem, the writer is perfectly happy with the idea that *one retailer and distributor*—Amazon—should wholly dominate not only ebook sales but also ebook reader sales. Any time someone starts talking about "optimizing" and immediately praises a business model with one, count them, one survivor, I get nervous.

The first comment is from a "publishing finance" person who notes that the numbers in the post are generally only true for mass-market fiction, with royalty rates, profit breakpoints and return rates much lower in other segments. As for the many ways in which any idiot could make publishing more efficient:

> Improvable processes: Good luck with that. We've had some pretty bright folks trying for centuries. You see, most of the kaizen techniques work on things that are more uniform than book production. If you think the steps you've found are complicated — just wait until you start talking details with a text designer or compositor!

Another comment makes another classic mistake: Assuming print-on-demand will actually save money. Sure, it eliminates returns—but it's *inherently* more expensive to print and ship single copies of books than it is to print large quantities.

I'm seeing a lot of comments—here and on related posts I don't discuss—that boil down to: "I'm only willing to pay $x for books, therefore books should only cost $x, and any facts about costs are simply irrelevant." There's no way to respond to such a line of argument. You know, I really only want to pay $4,000 for a high-mileage, safe, small car to use mostly around town but that's fun and legal to drive on California highways. So it's *the auto industry's responsibility* to make such a car available. **Now**. Any argument that cars just cost more than that to build is irrelevant.

"Irony3" posts one way out of the ebook pricing quandary—maybe—on June 12, 2009 at *Nonstopbooks* (nonstopbooks.blogspot.com/): "Advertising in ebooks." This writer, who's a Kindle owner, "would like to see a certain kind of advertising for ebooks. I would like to see ebooks sponsored and the process of sponsorship would allow people to buy a cheaper copy of the book."

The writer offers an example: an ebook that sells for $14.99 on Amazon. Honda sponsors a "Honda edition" for $9.99—adding a few pages of information or ads about Honda products after the title page (screen) of the ebook, but no ads in the text proper.

> I think people would remember the companies that sponsored the books they bought and made them more affordable. Honda, of course, was just being used as an example. Any company could sponsor a book. If there was some type of connection between the subject of the book and the sponsor of the book that might make the sponsorship even more appealing.

I read quite a few magazines. All but five of them rely heavily on advertising—and three of the rest are in trouble because there isn't enough advertising. (The three major science fiction magazines, if you're wondering.) In some cases—most magazines from Condé Nast or Time Warner, for example—it's clear that the nominal subscription price doesn't covering much more than mailing, certainly not writing and production. Most of the content is paid for by ads—and it's one of the miracles of magazine design that ads don't inherently interfere with reading. Of course, I'm also

old enough to remember when *really* cheap mass-market paperbacks included one or two ad inserts, helping to keep them really cheap. Would I take a $4 paperback with two or three ads over a $7 paperback with none? Probably.

Summing this up:

- Ebooks *should* be cheaper than print books—but it's not clear that they can legitimately be more than $2-$2.50 cheaper than the *equivalent* current print version, if authors are to survive and publishers are to do editing, design, marketing and the like. But do note *equivalent*: Once a mass-market paperback is available for $7 or $8, I can't understand why the ebook equivalent would cost more than $5 or $6.
- There's more than one way to get revenue, and other ways should be explored. But neither "infinite demand" nor Andersonomics (make the ebook free and you'll sell *loads* of print books or get rich through live appearances) seems certain or even likely on a general basis.
- "I only want to pay this much" works better for things where you can make easy substitutions, which may include some genres of literature—and *never* works beyond a certain level. As an argument for setting prices, it's on a par with holding your breath until you turn blue.

Ebooks and Higher Education

The single most obvious big-buck market for ebooks, either on dedicated readers or on notebook computers, would appear to be textbooks—for younger students because they could reduce the heavy load of schoolbooks, for higher education because they could be updated more rapidly and possibly not carry the extreme prices of textbooks. It's a multi-billion-dollar market ($9.8 billion according to one report), seemingly ripe for the taking.

That's easy to say. I should know, since I've been saying it for rather a long time. *Doing* it—and actually making the e-textbooks reasonably priced—is another matter. In fact, the big textbook publishers *have* been producing ebook editions, frequently at about half the price of the print version—but with very little success. Is that changing? Three items (two recent, one not so recent), all somewhat more formal than blog posts, discuss the matter.

E-books in higher education: nearing the end of the era of hype?

Mark R. Nelson originally published this in the *ECAR Research Bulletin* (January 8, 2008); it was republished in *EDUCAUSE Review* 43:2 (March/April 2008) (www.educause.edu/EDUCAUSE+Review/EDUCAUSEReviewMagazineVolume43/EBooksinHigherEducationNearing/162677). Nelson cites Arthur Sulzberger's notorious comment that he neither knew nor cared whether the *New York Times* would appear in print in 2012—and his subsequent "sort of" backing off, "It is my heartfelt view that newspapers will be around—in print—for a long time. But I also believe that we must be prepared for that judgment to be wrong."

Nelson uses the quotes to illustrate "a few key points relevant to those of us in higher education involved with, or concerned over, the future of printed course materials."

- If a newspaper like the *Times* could envision a point just five years away at which print distribution could end, what does that say for how college campuses distribute content and course materials?
- The organizational reaction of staff at the *Times* to such a change was visceral—as it might also be among faculty, librarians, and other content providers on campus. Can a change of this magnitude happen that quickly?
- Many believe that print will continue to be the preferred medium for much content long into the future, but it is also widely believed that change is coming and that change will be technology-driven.
- Now is the time to begin preparing for, or at least envisioning, the possibility of a future with at least substantively fewer print materials. If there is a possibility that print could go significantly digital over the next five years, what should campus communities be thinking about now in preparation?

To Nelson, the key issues are whether print really has "an anticipated life span of five more years" and whether ebooks are finally ready to take off. Odd as I find it to generalize from newspapers to print as a whole, these are still points worth pondering—although the notion that print *as a whole* could disappear within five years (well, *four* years now) is so ludicrous as to deserve very little thought.

A discussion of ebook sales in the U.S. and elsewhere includes one remarkable statement: "In China, the government recently acquired 165 million e-book readers for students." **Wow**! Looking for independent evidence of that claim (made in a conference speech), I see a 2008 report that there were 79 million ebook readers **total** in China by the end of 2008—probably 80 times as many as in the U.S. but at odds with the first claim. (Oddly, only 49.5 million ebook copies

were sold for those 79 million readers.) The more you look at that report, the more it appears that "ebook readers" refers to *people who read ebooks*, not devices—and only about 4.3 million of those were even remotely school-age. Another report citing the 79 million figure says only 0.3% of those *users* used ebook readers—turning that astonishing 79 million into a more plausible 240,000 or so.

> Higher education is expected to be at the forefront of the wave of e-book adoption over the next two years. Some experts predict that 2007–2009 will be transition years for the higher education e-book market, with large growth expected in both digital textbooks and digital library collections.

Maybe I've missed something, but as of mid-2009 that wave seems to be little more than a trickle, *especially* for digital textbooks.

Nelson looks at "distinct reasons why e-books have failed to take off as expected" and what's happened with some of these barriers. Briefly:

- **Standards, portability "and IP protection"**: Oddly, while Nelson cites "a common XML-based format that could be universally applied to textbook content," he doesn't directly mention EPUB or its predecessor OEB, the closest things to true open ebook standards to provide portability. While Nelson's discussion of IP uses scare quotes around **fair use** and prominently mentions "piracy," he does briefly note that DRM detracts from consumer usability—but fails to mention that DRM would preclude used e-textbook sales, thus negating much of any price advantage for students.
- **Ebook devices and software**: Nelson expects appropriate solutions within two years—but, for him, that means *full-color* e-paper. He says "commercially available some time in 2008"; that hasn't happened, but such a display could emerge by March 2010.
- **Cultural acceptance**: Nelson indulges in a bit of gen-gen here: "For those who grew up with paper books (p-books) and always read from p-books, switching to e-books is a bit uncomfortable for anything more than reference purposes." Later, Nelson basically *assumes* that e-textbooks will dominate, and soon: "As each successive grade of students enters college, they will have had more experience with technology in the classroom. **Within five years we should see the first students entering college who may never have used a print textbook**—for them, course materials will have always been provided in e-book form. While still taught by digital immigrants, those students may be the first true digital natives to enter higher education." (Emphasis added.) For that astonishing prediction to be true in more than a trivial number of cases, there would have needed to be large numbers of second-grade classes entirely using digital textbooks in the year 2000, with complete changeover ever since then. Has that really happened? (He cites a source claiming that 22% of students in grades 6-12 are *using* e-textbooks; that's quite different from **never using print textbooks**.)

Nelson calls for higher education to *prepare* for e-textbooks by 2013, a reasonable call—but also to approach the future with "a healthy dose of skepticism." The article seems a little light on that skepticism in some areas, and maybe that's OK.

How a student-friendly Kindle could change the textbook market

This commentary by Jeffrey R. Young appeared in the May 6, 2009 *Chronicle of Higher Education* shortly before Amazon announced the Kindle DX. Young notes the planned pilot project by a handful of universities to use Kindles preloaded with textbooks.

> Most experts interviewed by *The Chronicle* expressed skepticism that students would buy and carry around a Kindle for textbooks, even if the device was bigger and had better annotating and Web-browsing capabilities than Amazon's current e-book reader. But the new gadget might do something that all of the current providers of e-textbooks have failed to do—make digital textbooks seem cool.

Young notes that more than 80% of college students already own devices that can display e-textbooks: laptops. I was surprised that "more than half of all major textbooks are already offered in electronic form for download to those laptops." But they're not selling: "So far sales of electronic textbooks are tiny." Some observers say you need the equivalent of an iTunes store—but such an online store, CourseSmart, with more than 6,300 e-textbooks, has been around for two years. Young also cites a failed experiment with Sony Readers—"Students were excited at first to get an unusual new gadget, but they quickly found the readers too hard to flip pages in and take notes on." The Sony Reader has the same page size as the current Kindle.

Young cites problems with current e-textbooks, including images and supposed lack of understanding of special ebook features. Then there's the gotcha:

> Publishers are eager to go digital in hopes of eliminating the used-book market, as buyers are prohibited

> from reselling electronic books, argues Albert N. Greco…. That market represents "a staggering amount of business that the publishers lose," he said, "so by going to digital they'll be able to regain what they lose in used books."

Students skeptical Kindle DX can replace paper chase

Which leads us to the third item, appearing a day later in *Wired Magazine*'s Gadget Lab (www.wired.com/gadgetlab/2009/05/etextbooks/). Brian X. Chen leads with doubts: "Amazon will have to do much more than enlarge its Kindle to increase the e-reader's appeal to college students."

One grad student says he'd need "five Kindles" while writing essays. Another would only consider a DX if ebooks cost less than *used* physical textbooks—but that, since he already has a laptop, the Kindle would be superfluous.

> Students pointed out plenty of other issues about the DX to Wired.com. For instance, students often loan textbooks to one another, and currently that's not practical with a Kindle, as you'd have to loan your entire reader and library. Also, the beauty of paper textbooks is the ability to highlight sentences, underline keywords and keep all of them open at once. While the Kindle does have highlight and notes tools, the reader is sluggish with performance, and the keyboard is unnatural and clunky to type on.

This item is mostly thinkpiece, based on a total of 19 replies from students. More than three dozen comments raise interesting issues. One says, "Most important might be the ability to resell your textbook when you're done"—the thing publishers specifically want to prevent. A professor, suggests the DX might do better among faculty, if only to cope with all those "should read" PDFs of journal articles. A long comment from "automag," who owns both a Kindle and Kindle 2, says the things Kindles *don't* do well are precisely the things students need—e.g., fixed page numbers, indexes and tables of content, easy highlighting and note taking.

> Paradigm shifting devices are great when the paradigm being shifted to makes things easier and/or better. The Kindle is a positive paradigm shift for those of us who read a lot and want a more seamless (and cheaper) way to make purchases from Amazon.com. On the other hand, I don't see a positive shift for students who want to use the Kindle with their textbooks. It's just too cumbersome and slow."

(The page number issue isn't there for PDFs on the Kindle DX, to be sure.) Several people see the promise of one DX replacing several heavy textbooks—and one claims that the DX will be a hit because there will be free *pirate* versions of all textbooks once it's out.

Will the DX succeed as a textbook platform? Does it make sense to have a dedicated textbook reader? Do you need color e-ink to succeed?

The Bright Future of Ebooks

Four upbeat commentaries, two from the library field.

Why ebooks and ebook readers will eventually succeed

This article by J. Getty Purdy appeared October 13, 2008 on *eWeek.com* in the "Inside Mobile" section. Purdy's a true believer—"someday":

> Someday, we are all going to be reading books with some form of eBook reader. While some may doubt this prediction, let me explain why. And I hope, after you read what I have to say, that you just may agree with me.

He admits that reading books on current ebook readers (presumably including the Kindle and Sony) is "not an enjoyable or "better" experience than reading a paper-bound book." He also believes ebook readers don't just need to be *as good as* print books: "eBook readers are not going to be successful until they offer book lovers a better, more worthwhile and enjoyable reading experience than traditional paper-bound books do today."

He says someone should eventually be able to make an ebook reader that would be "so cool that, emotionally, seeing this new eBook reader would be like seeing the iPhone for the first time. You'd feel as if it was really right and that you'd 'have to' have one." But consider: while iPhones are selling very well, most new cell phones purchased are *not* iPhones—according to the NPD Group, iPhones aren't even the best-selling smart phones in the U.S. (first quarter 2009), while smart phones as a whole are less than a quarter of cell phone sales. Worldwide, iPhone sales were about 3% of smart phone sales in mid-2008; in a list of top vendors, Apple is lumped in with "Others." So *most* people don't feel they "have to" have an iPhone. That may be a significant digression, given that Purdy uses the iPhone as a model for how the ideal ebook reader should be designed.

Purdy's list of must-have features, with brief versions of what he believes those features must entail:

- **Correct size**: 6x8" display (10" diagonal), "very thin like the iPod touch," light.
- **Instant on/off**. (No disagreement here.) "It's an appliance, not a PC."
- **Great (natural) user interface**. Here again, the iPhone is the example.
- **High-contrast, high-resolution, bright color display**. Ah, there's the iPhone again—and the assertion that e-ink displays are "just too slow."

- **Random access**: You should be able to place multiple bookmarks in multiple books.
- **Durability**.
- **Storage**: "50GB would be adequate" and 5GB minimum—not for text but for multimedia.
- **Easy annotation**: He's looking for something *better* than annotating a print book with pen—selectable width and color of line, along with a highlighting function.
- **Easy access to dictionary and synonyms/antonyms**: An advantage over print books.
- **Acceptable cost of device**: He suggests the cell phone/cable TV model—cheap up front but with a multiyear contract, presumably binding you to a single distributor. He suggests $10 to $20 per month for a consumer device, $40 for a high-end system.
- **Built-in wireless**: Not just WhisperNet but multiple wireless technologies.
- **Acceptable business models**: "We have to get away from pricing books like their paper-bound relatives."
- **Broader distribution**: Even though he's calling for a subscription model, he also says ebook readers should work on *all* networks so you can use any distributor.
- **Integrated animation and video**.
- **Acceptable DRM**: Yes, he's assuming DRM, albeit with "an open standard."

His prediction? "Someday" will be "hopefully by 2025 but certainly by 2050" at which point more than half the population (worldwide) will be using ebook readers, with reading an ebook "a far better experience than reading a paper-bound book." And then we'll look back and laugh at how we killed all those trees…

Commenters noted that Purdy omits ease of page turning, the significance of board books, battery life, the "multiple gadget" issue, good text-to-speech and search capabilities. Several people found the subscription model undesirable for books (and noted that heavy readers tend to use libraries).

Would everyone jump *exclusively* to ebooks if the "perfect reader" existed? Frankly, I doubt it—and I doubt that you could get general agreement that Purdy's concept of perfect is everyone else's.

How the Kindle will change the world

That's the title of Jacob Weisberg's March 21, 2009 *Slate* commentary—and although Weisberg says "I'm doing my best not to become a Kindle bore," he comes off as an evangelist for the Kindle 2. "I can take a whole library on vacation! Adjust the type size! Peruse the morning paper without getting out of bed!"

> [H]owever the technology and marketplace evolve, Jeff Bezos has built a machine that marks a cultural revolution. The Kindle 2 signals that after a happy, 550-year union, reading and printing are getting separated. It tells us that printed books, *the most important artifacts of human civilization*, are going to join newspapers and magazines on the road to obsolescence.

Heady stuff. While Weisberg admits that you wouldn't want to read an art book (or a picture book to your children) on a Kindle, he says the Kindle provides *a fundamentally better experience* than reading from print.

Weisberg's cranky about hardback books, "printed on ever crappier paper with bindings that skew and crack." He thinks Amazon will eventually push publishers out of the equation and *become* "the only publisher a best-selling author needs." Does the idea of a one-publisher monopoly bother you? It doesn't bother Weisberg, apparently—any more than the fact that "best-selling author" leaves out the most interesting parts of print publishing.

> What we should worry about is that the system supports the creation of literature, if grudgingly. There's a risk that what replaces it won't allow as many writers to make as good a living. But there's also a chance it could allow more writers to make a better living… When it comes to literature, I'm optimistic that electronic reading will bring more good than harm. New modes of communication will spur new forms while breathing life into old ones. Reading without paper might make literature more urgent and accessible than it was before the technological revolution, just like Gutenberg did.

I must be missing something in this article, as it appears to give no reasons *why* the Kindle 2 is a better reading device than print on paper, other than Weisberg's own preferences. The article boils down to little more than "I love the Kindle 2, therefore print books are toast"—coupled with a remarkable incuriosity about the effects of a true publishing monopoly. It appears to be universalism and little more.

Turning a new page in ebooks

That's Marji McClure's feature in the April 2009 *Information Today.* She notes that, until the Kindle, ebook programs succeeded more as searchable collections for scientific audiences. Analysts are perhaps more encouraged by Amazon's extension of Kindle ebooks to "13 million iPhones" rather than just half a million Kindles. McClure hedges her bets: these things *may* signify that ebooks are moving into the mainstream and *could* make ebooks a viable and profitable proposition.

There's an odd quote from John Blossom, who says the $10 to $15 publishers get for Kindle titles (assuming Amazon takes no cut!) "falls to the bottom line" because there's no inventory risk. That ignores author royalties and amortizing non-print-related initial costs. He's assuming enormous market penetration, apparently: "you don't necessarily have to go to gigantic print runs to get gigantic market penetration as ebooks take off." *Gigantic* market penetration?

The article cites ways ebooks are beginning to be real parts of the publishing industry rather than peculiar sideshows. The Kindle isn't enough, to be sure: "But if and until we get to the point where a large segment of the population owns these devices—and at a price of $359 for the Kindle 2, that could take awhile—industry watchers agree that making ebooks accessible via a wide range of formats may be a more effective strategy." A big chunk of the article discusses models such as SpringerLink and Safari Books Online.

This is a realistic article, worth reading as an early 2009 snapshot of industry perceptions. Rich Rosy of Ingram Digital cautions against extreme expectations—in this case, for wider library adoption:

> "Is it going to be skyrocketing? I don't think so," he says. "I think it's going to be a gradual increase because we're talking about a conservative group and they need to make sure every dollar they spend is maximized."

Blossom, without citing probable changes as such, looks forward to increased functionality—either as true multimedia or social media:

> "One of the gaps in ebooks is the ability to share, the ability to build community around it," says Blossom, adding that there is potential to build communities and events around ebooks much like traditional book clubs have done for years. "The future of ebooks will be better integration of web technologies and more capabilities to share and collaborate and build insight and enthusiasm through other people who are reading the book," he says. "I think the ebook industry will be very exciting a few years from now as we begin to get into the sharing, the collaboration and integration capabilities of these books."

These suggestions don't necessarily change the form of the long narrative. LibraryThing and Shelfari are already here and book clubs have been around for decades. Will ebooks be transformative? The Magic 8-Ball (not *yet* a feature on any ebook reader I know of) says "Ask again later."

E-readers and libraries

Technically, the full title of this April 21, 2009 post on the *ALA Techsource blog* is "A TechSource blogger forum: E-readers and libraries." Daniel Freeman says the Kindle 2's release "has set off a firestorm of speculation about how e-readers are going to transform (destroy?) the publishing industry. Anything with the potential to transform reading has the potential to transform librarianship."

Jason Griffey recognizes DRM as a hurdle—but he's already decided on the future:

> The eventual truth is, though, that none of this matters. E-books are the future of reading in a very real way, simply because at some point they will be too cheap to not use... How can paper continue to compete with Moore's Law?

How can you argue with "inevitable" and technological determinism? Not that you'd find too much disagreement from the next TechSource blogger, Tom Peters, who's been flogging ebooks since long before the Kindle:

> Well, I have to admit that the idea of near-instantaneous delivery of hundreds of thousands or millions of e-books to just about anywhere I happen to be at the time is pretty appealing to me. Traditional ILL will still be useful and used for relatively obscure documents, but I think the Kindlesque way of delivering reading content is the wave of the future.

He does see "the Kindle breakaway" as leaving "libraries in the lurch" and wonders whether the "info elite" will all "migrate to Kindles and iPhones and such stuff, leaving print and libraries for the underclass?" Peters seems to have no doubt that anyone who *can* switch to ebook reading *will*—even with the loss of first sale rights (which he does mention).

Cindi Trainor is less deterministic about the future of books. She notes a pilot project at her library to circulate digital content on Kindles and iPod Touches—but also notes the problem of distribution models. "If institutional purchase is not being considered at all, have libraries already lost this battle?"

What I find interesting in the first two responses is *the*—that is, ebooks will be *the* future of books and reading, not (as one commenter says) "part of our future." But Leo Klein's as deterministic as Griffey: "Print is and will be replaced…" although he sees smartphones and netbooks as the replacements for print books. My only comment on all this may be wonderment that so many smart people are convinced that *replacement* is right around the corner. Really? (OK, many smart people were convinced of this a decade ago as well. Maybe I shouldn't be surprised.)

Not All Sweetness and Light

Guaranteed: "everybody" will love *any* ebook reader (or any other device, for that matter) **only** if you universal-

ize from your own feelings. "Everybody" will *never* agree that one particular future for books makes sense as *the future*—not even the future I regard as nearly certain: An uncertain mix of print and digital offering an ever-changing set of book-length texts, some—but by no means all—featuring multimedia or hyperlinks.

These items offer less sanguine views of the ebook future.

The automatically updatable book

Nick Carr, February 11, 2009, *Rough type*:

> One of the things that happens when books and other writings start to be distributed digitally through web-connected devices like the Kindle is that their text becomes provisional. Automatic updates can be sent through the network to edit the words stored in your machine—similar to the way that, say, software on your PC can be updated automatically today.

Not necessarily true. You can turn off WhisperNet. But it's a good point in any case. As Carr notes, updatability is probably a good thing for tourist guidesm but what about other books? He quotes Stephanie at *UrbZen* in February 9, 2009 post (urbzen.com/):

> The printed word—physically printed, on paper, in a book—might be heavy, clumsy or out of date, but it also provides a level of permanence and privacy that no digital device will ever be able to match…
>
> Consider what might happen if a scholar releases a book on radical Islam exclusively in a digital format. The US government, after reviewing the work, determines that certain passages amount to national security threat, and sends Amazon and the publisher national security letters demanding the offending passages be removed. Now not only will anyone who purchases the book get the new, censored copy, but anyone who had bought the book previously and then syncs their Kindle with Amazon—to buy another book, pay a bill, whatever—will, probably unknowingly, have the old version replaced by the new, "cleaned up" version on their device. The original version was never printed, and now it's like it didn't even exist. What's more, the government now has a list of everyone who downloaded both the old and new versions of the book.

The copy of *Lolita* sitting on your bookshelf contains exactly the same text now as it did when you purchased it years ago: You *know* that to be true. If you paid cash for it, nobody knows you own it. Stephanie admits her scenario might sound like "a crazy conspiracy theory," and that's what some comments (on her post) label it as—but Carr's not so quick to dismiss it:

> The unanticipated side effects of new technologies often turn out to be their most important effects. Printed words are permanent. Electronic words are provisional. The difference is vast and the implications worth pondering.

To my surprise, I don't see *any* comments on this post. Is Stephanie's scenario simply nonsensical? I'm not as certain as I'd like to be—and there's no doubt *at all* in my mind that online businesses are less likely to assure 100% reader confidentiality than libraries…particularly when the FBI comes a-knockin'.

Large-screen Kindle won't mean squat if Apple tablet arrives

Some hotshot tech journalists can't get past Single Winners and Lots of Losers, and Dylan Tweney reveals that tendency in this May 4, 2009 "Gadget Lab" post at *Wired.com*. The article title may tell you all you need to know.

He dismisses the Kindle as being too small, "only slightly larger than a 3"x5" index card." Then he notes the likely "Kindle XL" (the DX). Since Tweney is an absolute authority on everything, he throws in a sideslap at textbook publishing, "a prime example of the slowness, stupidity and waste of paper publishing."

None of this matters, according to this guru, if Apple releases an iPhone/iPod with a 9" or 10" touchscreen.

> The usefulness of a device like that would instantly trump that of any e-book reader, even if the battery life is poor and the screen less readable than an e-ink screen. That's because a simple, easy-to-use tablet would be able to do anything the e-book reader could (display the text of books using an app like Stanza, which Amazon recently acquired) plus it would have access to 40,000 apps and billions of web pages. Its screen would be able to display color, and it would undoubtedly let you access e-mail, IM and other apps that people want…

Let's overlook the idea that lousy battery life and inferior readability *don't matter*. Tweney says, *probably correctly,* that many more people would want a general-purpose tablet than a large-screen ebook reader—maybe not as ebook readers but as general-purpose tablets. It's the final paragraph that goes overboard:

> We don't know whether Apple will release a tablet or not. But if it does, its sales will make the Kindle's million units look like a rounding error.

First of all, "rounding error" would require the Apple tablet to sell more than 200 million units in its first year—incredibly unlikely. More important, it's an absurd argument—the idea that huge sales of Pomegranate A mean that profitable, large-scale sales of Watermelon B are irrelevant.

Tweney's been around long enough to know better. Most commenters weren't buying it, and two (properly, I think) labeled Tweney an "Apple fanboy."

With Kindle, can you tell it's Proust?

That's Joanne Kaufman's question in the April 24, 2009 *New York Times*. It begins with an anecdote and suggestion that publicly displaying a Kindle or Sony Reader "telegraphs a commitment to books" because they're so expensive. Ann Fadiman, on the other hand, was relieved that her essay collection was *not* available for the Kindle.

> Please, they're overlooking the really important concern: How will the Kindle affect literary snobbism? If you have 1,500 books on your Kindle — that's how many it holds — does that make you any more or less of a bibliophile than if you have the same 1,500 books displayed on a shelf?

This also belongs in facetiae, at least in part: It's about the "plain brown wrapper" effect of a Kindle as compared to well-stocked bookshelves in a home.

It's an interesting piece (URL not provided because access to past *NYT* pieces is iffy). Yes, ebook readers could reduce the "ineffable kinship" among readers that happens when people spot someone else reading a book—but, as noted in an earlier piece, they could also *expand* that through social networking. I find it interesting that Nicholson Baker doesn't care *how* people read his books—as long as they read them.

The failure of e-book devices

This one's pseudonymous, posted by "AndyW" on May 19, 2009 in his blog at *LISNews* (lisnews.org/failure_e_book_devices). It's not about ebook readers as such; it's about the general failure of makers to deal with libraries appropriately.

> The failure is not the technology. The capacity to download, store, and recall hundreds if not thousands of books is impressive. The ability to replicate the look of font on paper is incredible. Each generation of e-book devices is rapidly outpacing the previous incarnations with additional features such as internet browser, PDF support, wireless updates, subscription support, and multiple e-book file types. The technology in and of itself is grand and a true marvel of the modern times.
>
> The failure is how the e-book reader companies do not consider libraries as a viable customer…

AndyW digs into terms for the various device makers and ebook distributors and finds little that accommodates library circulation (or any form of lending).

> This simply cannot stand. If this is a product of the electronic industry getting into the publishing business, they need to wake up and smell the pulp. Libraries are not your average customer and we should not be treated as such; for lack of a better analogy, we are the street level dealers to our vast clientele. We deserve to get special treatment.
>
> So, all you e-book reader industry people out there, here's a couple of ideas for you from this librarian.
>
> (1) **Write terms of service exclusively for libraries**. Don't leave us in this gray legal area where no one is a winner. We won't want to lend out your product if we feel like we are going to get bit on the ass when you don't support it or repair it (due to terms of service violations) or suddenly decide to sue the crap out of us for lending them in the first place…
>
> (2) With your army of lawyers (Amazon, Sony, etc.), **write a service contract in which you provide us with devices and materials which we can then lend to patrons**. (Leave it to us as to how we make them financially responsible to borrowing the readers; we are better in the lost or damage item debt collection field than you are.)… Make it work so that we can put your devices on our shelves with materials that people will want and we will take care of the rest.
>
> (3) **Profit**. You profit both literally and through increased exposure for your product to the public who might not otherwise be interested in your e-book reader. We profit with increased patronage, circulation numbers, and overall system usage statistics. It is a win-win-win for us, you and our patrons. You can't beat that result, not even with a stick.

It's hard to say much about the comments, either directly or on *Teleread*'s copy of the post. Will ebook reader producers take libraries seriously? (Amazon's current policy is, in essence, "Don't ask, don't tell," and we know how well *that's* worked out elsewhere.)

Why e-books look so ugly

An odd one from Priya Ganapati on May 18, 2009 at *Wired.com.*.

> After spending a weekend with the Sony e-book reader, I found that the convenience of having so many books in a single, lightweight, slim device had me hooked, and its screen offers nearly print-like readability. But after about four hours of flipping through blocks of grey text I found myself feeling strangely melancholic. It couldn't have been the lack of sunshine. Moving from one book to another, while easy, didn't help: I was still staring at the same font, the same gray background and the same basic layout.

That leads into a discussion of book design—typeface choices, cover design, all the rest. Covers? They might improve soon.

> When it comes to the guts of the e-book, fundamental aspects such as fonts and page layouts become a battle. There's a dearth of typographic expression in e-books... That's because e-readers' firmware offers few font choices. Licensing custom fonts from a well-known foundry or font designer, a ubiquitous practice in print book design, is an impossibility for e-books.

Will it get better? Probably. The Kindle DX, able to display PDF without too much shrinkage, automatically allows for every typeface a book could use. Otherwise—well, as the article says, "As e-book readers get more popular they will get more sophisticated, bringing in a new crop of designers that understand a changing world of digital publishers."

How Ebooks Could Change Reading

This odd cluster goes back to January 2008. You can guess my overall take:

- When someone suggests that a new platform may create *new* genres and ways of reading that add to and complement existing ones, I'm likely to say, "Sounds likely; let's explore the possibilities."
- When someone suggests that these new genres and ways of reading *will displace* existing ones that work, particularly when they say they will do so entirely or almost entirely, I'm likely to say, "Unlikely based on history—and I don't see evidence for it."

Note the hidden caveat in the second bullet, a caveat that digital extremists could use to undermine the entire statement: "ones *that work*." If you believe people really don't want to read long linear texts anyway, and that most people are just looking for ways to escape from a novel's plot to hyperlinked material, then you could argue that print novels *don't work*. That's a very different argument than saying "100,000-word print novels are dead because Japanese readers love cell-phone novels." Equally implausible, to my mind, but very different.

The mirth of comeuppance

Tom Peters posted this on January 21, 2008 at *ALA TechSource blog*. He's chuckling about the popularity of cell phone novels in Japan—"novels" *written* on cell phones in short, pithy sentences.

> And people—lots of people, as in millions—are reading these cell phone novels on, well, their cell phones. The authors often write while they are commuting, and cell phone novels often can be accessed in serialized form. Both authors and readers have discovered the cell phone as a place where a narrative art form can survive and flourish. A new genre seems to have been born.

So far, so good. I might want to poke at "novel" a little—in the U.S., at least within science fiction, there's a generally accepted definition of "novel" as longer than 50,000 words. Not that there haven't been shorter "novels," but to my mind (and the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America), those are typically novellas (20,000 to 50,000 words) published as books. A relevant item in the *New York Times* article Peters cites is the comment that cell phone novels were being created and consumed "by a generation whose reading habits had consisted mostly of manga, or comic books." (Note: **I'm** not equating manga with comic books; the *Times* is.) Reading further, we discover that most cell phone novels are "diary-like" and "written and read mostly by young women in the teens and 20's."

> All this generates a sense of the mirth of comeuppance in me, as I and others have spent the last ten years contemplating and arguing about the future of electronic books. Most of us became mired in issues that may have been so much red herring: the quality of the overall reading experience, the form factor of the reading appliance, DRM, and even eyestrain. While we fretted over all that, young folks on the western edge of the Pacific Rim were beginning to comprehend and exploit the affordances of digital text as an art form.

Maybe. If you've been pushing the inevitability of ebook triumph as much as Peters has been, it *is* about those "red herring" issues, because you're saying we'll read *all* our books in e-form. For people to move from manga to teen fiction in a new form is something entirely different: It's an addition, not a replacement. If teens living with unlimited texting find an urge to create longer narratives (and even if these cell-phone novels aren't 50,000 words, chances are they are *at least* novelette length, 7,500 to 20,000 words), that sounds like a good thing—one that has very little to do with the overall future of print books. (Peters goes on to suggest that librarians "should be proactive in fostering cell phone novelists and readers here in the U.S." I'm not sure I'd draw that conclusion—but I'm not sure I'd shy away from it either.)

The future of reading

This article by Ezra Klein appeared in the May/June 2008 *Columbia Journalism Review*. Maybe it's fortunate that it appeared back then, when I was still printing potential *C&I* source material in full. Now, I tag items in delicious, then come back and print lead sheets (first pages) to organize them for use—avoiding excess printing and paper when I can. In this case, that would mean I'd only be able to discuss the first 280-odd words, less than one-tenth of the article—because the rest has since disappeared behind a pay wall. You can see that at www.cjr.org; for the full piece, consult the print magazine or appropriate database.

Klein bought a Kindle. He loves the screen and finds its bookishness "almost indescribably strange upon first glance." Then things get strange:

> Though Amazon has transformed the way we purchase content, its business model has always contained a crucial inefficiency: Amazon gives you unlimited, free instant access to text about books, so long as you read it on your computer screen. Then, when you're ready, they'll also sell you some text, only it won't be unlimited or instant. Instead, it will be printed on mashed-up tree, put in a box, and sent across the country to you. What's in that box is simply more text, no different from what you read on your computer, save for the wasteful, inefficient, and costly method of production. For all that we rebel against the idea, examined rationally, the death of the book would be no surprise.

Pretty clearly "we" does not include Ezra Klein. (Let's ignore the 90% of consumer books that are *not* purchased through Amazon: Transformation is a sometimes thing.) Somehow, Klein seems to have thought a librarian might "berate me" for using a Kindle—which says he hasn't been reading the effusions of librarians! "In fact, nobody noticed at all" during the month he was flaunting the device.

> Though reading the Kindle felt like a courageous betrayal of every word written since the moment papyrus gave way to paper…

After a start like that, with Klein "courageously betraying" the whole history of paper, I couldn't stop laughing long enough to type. Klein suddenly noticed that *everybody else* was busy reading text off screens: "The Kindle is far less the start of a revolution than the codification of one."

Klein *knows* the reality, based on looking back at earlier death-of-print predictions. Print and radio coexist. Print and TV coexist. But somehow *now it's different*. Why? "Using the Kindle is a sharp reminder of the limitations of printed text." It's not manipulable. It's static and fixed (which, to Klein, is a disadvantage). "Traditional text is poorly suited" to informing. I read Klein's discussion of how awful print books are for nonfiction purposes—and I either don't get it or disagree. For some uses, absolutely—but for most of those uses book-length text isn't the ideal medium anyway.

I'm impressed Klein can cite all the virtues of changeable text and sees none of the problems. I'm also impressed that he blames publishing delays on the inefficiencies of print. He suggests ongoing conversations between readers and authors (which happen now on author blogs)—"conversations" that readers would supposedly *pay for* at a rate that would provide healthy income. Really?

Klein believes reading *will* change because he *wants* writing to change. Here's the close:

> But if the Kindle's successor or competitors are to succeed, it will be because Amazon used its status as the world's largest online bookseller to *force authors* to think seriously about creating content that works better than the book, that goes where the book cannot, that's interactive and cooperative and open in ways that printed text will never be. [Emphasis added.]

Other than the slightly bizarre idea that Amazon should **force authors** to change their evil ways, this strikes me as a call for *new* genres—not a call to lose what's there now unless, as Klein apparently does, you believe books just don't work for nonfiction. (The idea that one company should *properly* be forcing changes in writing is also a little unnerving, particularly given that company's fondness for DRM. Does everybody love monopolies these days?)

The first comment (Klein's article is fixed content produced in print magazine form, but with the availability of online commenting—a community function, if you will) is an articulate statement on books as communal or shared objects and their efficiency in that form. There was only one other comment—which also seems a bit strange.

Or, rather, there were only two comments *on the CJR site*. Norman Oder at *Library Journal* (writing in one of LJ's blogs) on May 20, 2008) welcomes "the concept of a living, hyperlinked electronic text that can be updated—despite the challenge that poses to the publishing system and its role in vetting manuscripts—and the possibility that communities of readers could react to books in the same way that they currently comment on article or blogs"—but notes the "chaff with the wheat" of internet commenting: "we all know…that no one wants to read all the comments on an article, much less a book."

Of a number of other comments, I'll note only Marcus Banks' "Of Kindles and changes in writing," posted June 25, 2008 at *Marcus' world* (mbanks.typepad.com/my_weblog/). Banks sees the complementarity of new and old media: "The Kindle won't end the paper book, just like the Web didn't end TV, and just like TV didn't end the radio or movies. Many old technologies still make sense even after cool new ones come along. Heck—there's still value in the print newspaper (which gives a boundary to the news that can disappear in a world of wonderfully endless hyperlinks)." He agrees that writing for digital reading can change how you write (adding links, etc.)—but Banks sees such writing as also complementary. I agree.

To print or not to print

After 11,000 words, it's time for a digression—one that belongs in another section, to be sure. Doug

Johnson's June 1, 2008 post at *The blue skunk blog* also came long before I started using delicious—but, just for fun, I keyed the title in to the search function. It yields seven articles with that as the full or partial title—and I'm intrigued by the kind of kaleidoscopic or "chance" essay you could get by assuming that all such stories are related.

How much of a stretch is that? The first is definitely about print—it's about DPI, dots per inch, and the difference between on-screen and print resolution. The second has to do with freedom of the press and college newspapers. The third, prefaced by "Color printing," concerns choices for color printers. The fourth is on CSS—specifically, stylesheets that differentiate between screen and print views. The fifth, on freedom *and responsibility* of the press in Kenya. Doug Johnson's post comes sixth. Last? From a digital scrapbooker about printing habits for "full digital pages."

Getting back to the topic at hand, Johnson—who's excited about ebook possibilities both as an educator and reader—finds himself a print addict. "Anything more than a couple pages long that I need to read with care goes to the printer." (I can no longer say the same, although "with care" is one of those tricky phrases. I wonder whether I'm being less thorough with items I read online?) He read William Powers' *Hamlet's Blackberry* and recommends it. Here's a pertinent passage:

> We have seen that new technologies do not necessarily eliminate old ones, at least not as quickly or predictably as is often assumed. However, when new modes of communication arrive, they do often change the role played by existing media." (p.26) [Powers] argues that "paper's work has been shifting away from storage and toward communication."

Powers cites four important affordances of paper: Tangibility, spatial flexibility, tailorability (ease of markup) and manipulability. But Johnson's more interested in two other characteristics of paper:

> The first is that it is *immutable*. "Unlike a Web page that can be changed in the blink of an eye, a paper document implies a certain commitment to the content it carries." (p. 49)… This may also explain why I take a good deal more time and care writing an 800 word magazine column than a longer blog entry—no going back to "re-write" the column.
>
> The second characteristic is that paper is a *selective* medium. "A hard-copy document can only hold only as much information as will fit on its pages, and it cannot link to other sources except by verbal reference... The immensity of the digital trove also makes it inscrutable, unwieldy, and, at times, overwhelming."…

Klein sees immutability as a limitation, Johnson as a virtue. They may both be right.

The once and future e-book: on reading in the digital age

John Siracusa contributed this fairly long essay February 1, 2009 at *Ars Technica* (arstechnica.com/gadgets/news/2009/02/the-once-and-future-e-book.ars). He was involved with ebooks early on—and still says "people don't get e-books." A few items from the article:

- Siracusa—correctly, in my opinion—finds it problematic that both content (ebooks) and devices (readers) are called ebooks (or e-books, if you prefer) by many people. He thinks there's a clear distinction in music, where people understand that the medium is "just a vessel" (I'd suggest Siracusa hasn't had contact with vinyl fans!) and finds a "stubborn" clinging to book form for novels, biography and history. To him, this is "baggage."
- He cites objections to ebooks but speaks of those raising them as "offenders," which gives you an inkling of Siracusa's stance. He says unfavorable comparisons of screen to print are accurate but "they don't matter"—because we read lots of stuff off the screen. I respond: *So what*? If I hear more music on a car radio than on first-rate headphones, that doesn't nullify the better sound of the headphones *when I care about what I'm hearing*. The proposition that quantity negates quality is silly. Yes, "people will read text off screens"—but millions of us who *do* read lots of text off screen still *prefer* to read long text in print form. For Siracusa to say he's getting "the screen *technology* argument off the table once and for all" is ludicrous.
- So, too, with devices—because some people read lots of text off some digital devices, "fretting" over "real or imagined" failings of a dedicated ebook reader is irrelevant.
- Here's the magic word: "The *inevitable* e-book" (emphasis added). Since he's used "logic" and "reasoning" to demolish objections, he moves on to the simple truth that people love books. And comes up with the standard answer: "But the truth is, these things always turn out the same way. And I have some bad news for the bibliophiles. The beloved, less technically sophisticated information conveyance with the pedigreed history doesn't win."

May I just say *Aaarggh*. For Siracusa to proceed by citing "people die" as the basis for "progress"—

because, you know, the next generation prefers the screen—is both predictable and pathetic. Then he cites the "plain as day" merits of ebooks: convenience, power (searchability), potential.

Let's look at that third one—it's the shortest and raises a whole *bunch* of interesting questions in the real world: "**Potential**: Consume, share, and remix all of the above with anyone, an unlimited number of times." Really? So DRM and copyright will just fade away? Authors really won't mind that one copy sells and the rest are shared, and their works are "remixed" ad hoc? Maybe.

The next section offers Siracusa's take on the triumph of CDs over LPs—and it becomes clear that Siracusa *believes* Medium X *always* replaces Medium Y, all real-world evidence to the contrary. He parenthesizes one big reason that CDs succeeded so rapidly: Record companies forced the issue. Remarkably, he views the "transition" from CDs to downloads as a done deal, referring to the loss of lyrics and liner notes (and fidelity) in the past tense.

Not satisfied, Siracusa uses the moldy device of comparing print books to horses and ebooks to cars. Which proves…oh, wait. Well, it's on par with the rest of his proofs.

Here follows a "refresher course" on DRM with the usual technophile's assurance that it doesn't actually work—but *it does* for most consumers. Then he turns to actual costs. Not wanting to get bogged down with facts, he does a handwave on the cost of producing a digital version of a best-seller—costs that are only covered by print versions *as long as there are print versions*. He's probably right to say that ebook sales are highly profitable add-ons for successful print publishers, which may be why so many books *are* available as ebooks. But he manages to blame publishers for sabotaging the ebook market. And since Siracusa was an early participant, it leaves room for a lengthy rant about Apple and various others.

Siracusa prefers ebooks. *Therefore, he believes everyone else should*. Can we get an Amen? He doesn't say that outright. He feels that we should "give it an honest try"—that we should invest in and try ebooks *whether we want to or not*. If you don't like them, *keep trying*. Why? Because *it's the inevitable future*. Right.

How the e-book will change the way we read and write

That's Steven Johnson in the April 20, 2009 *Wall Street Journal*. How much does Johnson love his Kindle?

> Every genuinely revolutionary technology implants some kind of "aha" moment in your memory—the moment where you flip a switch and something magical happens, something that tells you in an instant that the rules have changed forever.

His latest such moment came with the Kindle when, sitting alone in a restaurant reading a nonfiction ebook, he had the urge to read a novel, purchased one, and had finished the first chapter by the time the check arrived.

The first paragraph makes me wonder—I'd guess *lots* of significant technologies have snuck up on us without "aha" moments. Maybe I'm just not much for magical occurrences that tell me "in an instant that the rules have changed forever." Maybe that's the difference between significant and revolutionary; maybe it's the difference between appreciation and fervor.

Johnson was suddenly *certain* that the "migration" of books to ebooks "would likely change the way we read, write and sell books in profound ways." Easier to buy—but also easier to stop reading. *More* books—and, somehow, sitting there reading an ebook alone in a restaurant will "transform the solitary act of reading into something far more social." As a library user, I don't get the "easier to stop reading" in any case—and I don't buy books unless I'm sure I want to read them all the way through. At $10 a pop, I'm not sure "easier to stop" is such a good thing.

I was prejudging above, before I read the rest of the piece carefully. Let's see the nuances and evidence for Johnson's claims. We've "drifted further and further away" from books—I'm not sure why, but it has something to do with digital text being available. Books "can't compete with…hyperlinked rivals." You can't prove that by book sales, but those are just messy facts.

Johnson makes much of Google Book Search, its "almost 10 million books" and the ability to search across millions of books instantly, or—as he assumes—to search a "shadow version of your entire library, including every book you've ever read." He sees this as making huge changes in scholarship and discovery. He also thinks easier book buying will vastly increase book sales, and that might be true. (Apparently, Johnson is one of those with such unlimited funds that when someone mentions an interesting book, *he buys it*—none of that inferior library experience for him!) He also thinks this "infinite bookstore at your fingertips" is bad for attention, because it's so easy to drop another $10 and abandon the book you're reading for some other book.

> Because they have been largely walled off from the world of hypertext, print books have remained a kind of game preserve for the endangered species of linear, deep-focus reading. Online, you can click happily from blog post to email thread to online *New Yorker* article—

> sampling, commenting and forwarding as you go. But when you sit down with an old-fashioned book in your hand, the medium works naturally against such distractions; it compels you to follow the thread, to stay engaged with a single narrative or argument.

As I read this, Johnson's saying that we only give books our attention *because we have no choice*; that, once given tools to do so, we'll flit from book to book as well. A sad statement on his fellow man, unless he's universalizing from his own habits. He "fears" that *we all* (there's that universalism) may read books "the way we increasingly read magazines and newspapers: a little bit here, a little bit there."

Then there's the strangest aspect, although it's one mentioned by other deep thinkers: That, somehow, ebooks make books social:

> With books becoming part of this universe, "booklogs" will prosper, with readers taking inspiring or infuriating passages out of books and commenting on them in public. Google will begin indexing and ranking individual pages and paragraphs from books based on the online chatter about them… You'll read a puzzling passage from a novel and then instantly browse through dozens of comments from readers around the world, annotating, explaining or debating the passage's true meaning.
>
> Think of it as a permanent, global book club…

Johnson sees "every page of every book individually competing with every page of every other book that has ever been written… The unity of the book will disperse into a multitude of pages and paragraphs." I don't believe Johnson actually fears this dystopian future; I sense that he welcomes it, destructive though it is to either well-plotted fiction or linear narrative in general. Better make your point in a paragraph, 'cause otherwise the reader will be off to some *other* paragraph!

And he assumes writing will change to match:

> Writers and publishers will begin to think about how individual pages or chapters might rank in Google's results, crafting sections explicitly in the hopes that they will draw in that steady stream of search visitors.
>
> Individual paragraphs will be accompanied by descriptive tags to orient potential searchers; chapter titles will be tested to determine how well they rank. Just as Web sites try to adjust their content to move as high as possible on the Google search results, so will authors and publishers try to adjust their books to move up the list.

It is all, to my jaundiced eye, more than a little sad—but also a little improbable.

When one commenter notes the absence of the Sony Reader with its million *free* ebooks, another says it can't cause the "aha moment" because the content doesn't arrive instantaneously. One long-time reader of ebooks (who doesn't use a dedicated device) doesn't think they encourage you to *abandon* books; the best systems make it easy to remember where you were in each book, and he finds himself reading multiple books *less* often now.

The social dilemma of e-reading

Thessaly La Force commented on Johnson's article in this April 24, 2009 online-only piece at *The New Yorker* blogs (www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2009/04/the-social-dilemma-of-ereading.html). La Force calls his opinions "wildly optimistic" and is skeptical of the "social books" idea:

> Really? Project Gutenberg, which has been digitizing works since 1971, contains thousands of books—all free…to copy, paste, e-mail, and reference at any hour, and, yet it hasn't produced a worldwide conversation that explains the greatness of *Middlemarch* any better than a good English professor or an enthusiastic friend can. Online discussion can clarify, but it can also obfuscate; comment threads devolve into petty debates and dissenting opinion. And no technology—codex, moveable type, or digital ink—can ever establish the "true meaning" of a written passage.

La Force finds ebook readers unattractive, but that's another issue. Overall, though, La Force sees the opposite of what Johnson seems to desire:

> [E]-reading's success, in my opinion, depends more on a Kindle behaving like a book and less like a machine. We use books to escape the hundreds of e-mails, text messages, and phone calls that interrupt our day. Reading is both solitary and social—a tricky balance, yes—but one that simple paper and ink still manage to pull off.

Jason Kottke offers another brief take on Johnson's article in "Our grim e-book future," an April 20, 2009 post at *kottke.org*. He's noting the kind of openness required for this worldwide network of interlinked book pages and commentary to actually work:

> Aside from some notable exceptions like Project Gutenberg, e-books are currently only as open and free as the publishing companies (and Amazon and Google) want them to be. I think those two initial conditions change the playing field. Copy/paste/publish to your booklog without significant restrictions or payment? Sharing a passage of a book with someone who doesn't own that book, as verified through a third-party DRM system? Good luck! Readers will have to fight for those kinds of features. And perhaps we'll eventually win. But for right now, the bookloggers that Johnson speaks of are only two letters away from how the publishing industry might label them: bootleggers.

Clive Thompson on the future of reading in a digital world

A long title for a short article—653 words at *Wired.com* on May 22, 2009. Thompson is another one who believes in the social nature of books and, apparently, turning books into series of semi-independent passages. He doesn't think there's a choice—because, as may be true for devoted *Wired* readers, none of us have attention spans any more:

> Literary pundits are fretting: Can books survive in this Facebooked, ADD, multichannel universe? To which I reply: Sure they can. But only if publishers adopt Wark's perspective ["blowing books open" into series of paragraphs with independent comment streams] and provide new ways for people to encounter the written word. We need to stop thinking about the future of publishing and think instead about the future of reading.

Thompson states as a fact that "every other form of media that's gone digital has been transformed by its audience"—that comments on TV shows and newspaper stories actually *transform* TV shows and newspaper stories. Maybe—maybe not. It's hard to tell here, although it's interesting that Thompson also cites the highly anecdotal experience of authors giving away free digital copies and finding more print sales. At least Thompson's not hard-core for all social reading:

> I'm not suggesting that books need always be social. One of the chief pleasures of a book is mental solitude, that deep, quiet focus on an author's thoughts—and your own. That's not going away. But books have been held hostage offline for far too long. Taking them digital will unlock their real hidden value: the readers.

Among other mostly-complimentary comments, there's one who believes "the primary value provided by a book is the original intellectual property the author gives us, *not* the claptrap provided by its readers." That's too strong, but I'm inclined to second the commenter's suggestion that *Wired* writers "forgo payment for all future columns you write…" to align practice with philosophy.

Helene Blowers comments on Thompson's article in "The future of reading," a May 28, 2009 post at *LibraryBytes*. She believes that a future full-color ebook reader means "the evolution of the ebook will explode into a full blown culture revolution." She's been playing with BookGlutton.com, which invites interaction with book annotations of others—and, well… "I think once the Kindle or Sony (or rumored iBook) incorporates this type of functionality into their ereader app, then the competition will be over, period. **The future of reading** will have been born." Wow. (Emphasis added.) Not *a* new way for reading and discussing some items; not a set of conversations that might involve some portion of book readers—*the future of reading*.

Reading Dickens four ways

To end this installment, here's an oddity from the June 12, 2009 *Chronicle of Higher Education* by Ann Kirschner, recounting her attempt to read *Little Dorrit* in paperback, as an audiobook, on the Kindle, and on an iPhone. She's a Manhattanite, with lots of use of public transportation. That might suggest to another writer that her experience and conclusions are anecdotal and personal—but there's nothing new about New Yorkers (or Californians, I'll admit) assuming that We All are As They Are—or at least we *should* be.

To abbreviate an odd article, her prediction is that the iPhone is "a Kindle killer." She doesn't care about e-ink readability, apparently, and of course (as with "everybody" or about 13 million people, whichever you prefer) her iPhone is always with her. She calls the Kindle screen "a permanent dishwater gray" and doesn't worry about the iPhone's limited battery life. And, of course, she's not *old* so the small screen of the iPhone isn't an issue. (She slaps several generations underhandedly: of the newer generation she says "Right now, they aren't buying Kindles—and they aren't reading books." Nice.)

Admission: I haven't read *Little Dorrit*—and after failing to make it through the first two hours of an eight-hour adaptation on PBS, I suspect I never will. For Ann Kirschner, the ubiquity of the device is the only relevant issue—and since "we all" do (or *should*) carry iPhones all the time, that's the clear winner.

Offtopic Perspective

50 Movie Comedy Classics, Part 1

What makes a comedy? Should you laugh out loud? Are grins enough? Can a movie that's depressing most of the way through, but with a somewhat happy ending, be a comedy classic? Is a movie a comedy because it stars actors known as comedians?

"Classics" in the names of these 50-movie collections basically means "movies we could get for free," so I'm not looking for true classic status. A grin now and then: That would be nice. In some cases, I got at least that much. In others, I felt as though "comedy" meant "not a tragedy": The movie ends somewhat happily with at least one major character still alive.

Disc 1

It's tricky to watch silent short comedies, particularly slapstick comedies—all the more so when you're alone. There's the time gap and change in comedy styles to consider; silents offer fewer clues; and most of all, to be fair to the original flick, you have to wonder what it would be like to watch it in a movie theatre surrounded by hundreds of others, with organ music accompanying the movie. I'm trying to do that; it's not always easy.

This disc consists of five collections of shorts.

Stan Laurel Festival (all b&w, all silent and presented with unrelated music, all starring Stan Laurel). Includes *Mud and Sand*, 1922, Gilbert Pratt (dir.), 0:26; *Just Rambling Along*, 1918, Hal Roach (dir.), Clarine Seymour, 0:09; *Oranges and Lemons*, 1923, George Jeske (dir.), 0:12.

> *Mud and Sand* would seem inordinately strange if you hadn't seen Rudolph Valentino's *Blood and Sand.* Fortunately, I had—and recently. With Stan Laurel as Rhubarb Vaselino—well, it's pretty much a plot-for-plot remake but with silly names, lots of titles talking about "bull" in both meanings and Laurel's slapstick. The print's poor at times, and this seemed as forced as many single-movie spoofs.
>
> *Just Rambling Along* is apparently one of the earliest Laurel shorts. Its best moment is in a cafeteria line where Laurel manages to cadge a fairly full meal out of a ten-cent cup of coffee (but the pretty young thing he sits next to swaps his not-yet-paid $0.10 ticket for her $1.25 big meal). Good print and so-so slapstick: I might have been laughing in that theater.
>
> *Oranges and Lemons* is set in a citrus processing facility and grove and makes no sense at all—but it's a decent slapstick short with just the kind of physical nonsense Laurel could do well. Generally decent print. All three shorts are accompanied by appropriate (if not directly related) music.
>
> Considering that the whole trio adds up to about 46 minutes and there's not a gem among them, I can't give this more than $0.75.

Our Gang Festival. Includes *Our Gang Follies*, 1937, b&w, Gordon Douglas (dir.), George 'Spanky' McFarland, Carl 'Alfalfa' Switzer, Billie 'Buckwheat' Thomas, Doodles Weaver and the rest of Our Gang, 0:21; *School's Out*, 1930, b&w, Robert F. McGowan (dir.), Jackie Cooper, Allen 'Farina' Hoskins, Bobby 'Wheezer' Hutchins and the rest of the Little Rascals, 0:20; *Bear Shooters*, same credits (by and large), 0:20.

> I doubt that I'd have been an avid consumer of Our Gang comedies even "in the day," but I could be wrong. These three have different casts and considerably different qualities. My first inclination, especially given the opening titles, was to believe that one movie was the "real" Our Gang and the other two were "Hal Roach's Little Rascals in Our Gang"—but it turns out "Little Rascals" and "Our Gang" seem to be used interchangeably for a whole succession of casts.
>
> The first (and newest) movie is the newer group with Spanky McFarland, Alfalfa Switzer and Buckwheat Thomas, while the other two feature Jackie Cooper, Farina Hoskins and the rest of the earlier group—an almost entirely different cast. I couldn't warm up to Cooper's crew. (Good grief. There were **221** of these things between 1922 and 1944!)
>
> *Our Gang Follies* (of 1938, not 1937) is cute and well produced, consisting mostly of song-and-dance routines in a follies run by Spanky. The hook is that Alfalfa, the star crooner, has decided he wants to sing opera (which consists of singing "I am the barber of Seville" three times, followed by "Figaro" twice)—and after getting booed off the stage, he goes to an opera house where the manager, to get rid of him, signs him to a contract 20 years in the future. Comes a dream and flashforward 20 years, where all the kids are still kids, Alfalfa's bombed as an opera singer (getting vegetables thrown at him) and is put out on the street to sing opera and collect coins. Spanky owns a nightclub and invites him in—but Alfalfa can't sing there, because the opera impresario won't allow it. Never mind; it all works out. A clever little two-reeler.
>
> The other two? Well, *School's Out* has the credits spoken by a pair of little girls; otherwise, it's Klassroom Komedy that mostly revolves around kids who don't want their teacher to get married and think her brother is actually her suitor. *Bear Shooters* involves a camping trip, sibling rivalries, limburger cheese and, for reasons that aren't apparent, two men hiding in the woods who want to scare off the kids and do so by one of them donning a gorilla suit. Maybe I would have found it hilarious when I was five years old. I doubt it. Mostly for *Our Gang Follies*, I'll say this group might conceivably be worth $0.50.

All-Star Extravaganza. Umbrella title for three entirely different shorts:

> *The Stolen Jools* (aka *The Slippery Pearls*), 1931, b&w, William C. McGann (dir.), Wallace Beery, Buster Keaton, Laurel & Hardy, Gary Cooper, Loretta Young and dozens of stars (more than 50 in all). 0:20. An odd little all-star short to raise money for a tuberculosis sanatorium, this was funded by Chesterfield (they get a credit and are the only cigarettes mentioned), presumably done for almost nothing by dozens of stars and distributed for free by Paramount. Lots of cameos dressed up as a jewel-theft mystery. Schtick on a stick, but some of it's decent schtick. With almost two minutes of credits for a 20-minute two-reeler, it presages today's bloated credits. I'll give it $0.25.

Ghost Parade, 1931, b&w, Mack Sennett (dir.), Harry Gribbon, Andy Clyde, Marion Sayers, 0:20 [0:17]. This odd item has some people in an old house that appears haunted, lots of slapstick, plot elements that seem to pop up and disappear randomly, mice crawling over a xylophone and somehow creating good music, and Halloween costumes. It might have been hilarious at the time, it may be typical of Mack Sennett shorts, and I wonder whether its status as an early talkie (with a credit for sound synchronization) is important. It's also missing a few minutes. To be charitable, I'll give it $0.10.

La Cucaracha, 1934, color, Lloyd Corrigan (dir.), Steffi Duna, Don Alvorado, Paul Porcasi, Eduardo Durant's Rhumba Band, 0:20. Writing these notes *before* looking at IMDB, deliberately, this pleasant surprise seems likely to be a very early 3-strip Technicolor short, done partly to show off Technicolor. (Two-strip Technicolor couldn't handle the full color spectrum.) It has big swatches of deep blue, reds, golds, greens, as well as other colors. The plot's cute, set in a cantina: Impresario and food snob arrives, speaking of taking a dancer to the big city under contract if he's good. Dancer's woman friend overhears this, accuses male of planning to desert her; he calls her La Cucaracha—the cockroach—and shakes her off. She sabotages the impresario's salad dressing (or, rather, goads him into sabotaging it himself—much better). Her friends convince her to sing a song (guess which one?). Then, the guy's big dance number comes up, she and her friends try to sabotage it by starting *La Cucaracha* again, the guy's dance partner walks off, turns out the two songs blend—and, of course, she winds up dancing the number, the impresario hires both of them, and all's well with the world. (After checking IMDB: **Right on the money**. This is the first live-action 3-strip Technicolor film and the color is nicely preserved. It won an Oscar as Best Short Subject, Comedy.) The sound's not great, but it's a charming little number and good demonstration of Technicolor, for which I'll give it $0.40.

So that totals $0.75 for the three shorts put together: Not terrible, not great.

Fatty Arbuckle Festival (all with Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, all silent and presented with unrelated music, all b&w). Includes *Fatty Joins the Force*, 1913, George Nichols (dir.), Dot Farley, Edgar Kennedy, Mack Swain, 0:12 [0:14]; *Fatty's Spooning Day* (also known as *Mabel, Fatty and the Law*), 1915, Roscoe Arbuckle (dir.), Mabel Normand, Harry Gribbon, Minta Durfee, 0:11; *Fatty's Suitless Day* (also known as *Fatty's Magic Pants*), 1914, Roscoe Arbuckle (dir.), Charley Chase, Minta Durfee, 0:12; *The Speed Kings*, 1913, Wilfred Lucas (dir.), Ford Sterling, Mabel Normand, several actual race-car drivers, 0:08.

If you find big men falling down a lot, sometimes not having pants and getting hit over the head by cops just hysterical, you'll love these—or at least the first three. If not… I will say the slapstick is surrounded by plots, although the second one's plot seems to be a love song to wifeswapping. The last one's not an Arbuckle short: He's in it for perhaps 90 seconds and is definitely a minor character. I just didn't find any of them all that funny, but I'll give the group $0.50.

Keystone Cops Festival. Misleading umbrella title for four shorts, the longest of which doesn't include cops of any sort. All silent (presented with unrelated music), all b&w.

The Bangville Police, 1913, Henry Lehrman (dir.), Mabel Normand, Nick Cogley, Dot Farley, Fred Mace, and a cop who looks like Fatty Arbuckle. 0:08. Odd little farm piece with a police chief who summons his troops by shooting into the ceiling several times and what seems to be the standard for gunplay: Guns have unlimited number of bullets, are almost always aimed at butts and never seem to inflict any damage. I'd have to stretch to come up with $0.05 for this seven-minute piece.

Love, Speed and Thrills, 1915, Mack Sennett (dir.), Mack Swain, Minta Durfee, Chester Conklin, Josef Swickard and the Keystone Kops, 0:13. Hunting gone bad and flirtations, plus some use of comedy cops and slapstick driving. Better than the first, but still no more than a dime's worth of humor. $0.10.

Her Painted Hero, F. Richard Jones (dir.), Hale Hamilton, Polly Moran, 0:21. I dunno. Maybe the Keystone Cops were watching as this two-reeler was filmed, but there are no police in the piece at all. It seems to be about big inheritances, untalented actors, spurned suitors (all gold-diggers) and a woman buying her way onto the stage where slapstick chaos ensues. The chaos is worth $0.10.

Wife and Auto Trouble, 1916, Dell Henderson and Mack Sennett (dir.), William Collier Sr., Blanche Payson, Alice Davenport, Mae Busch, 0:14 . Yes, there are cops—for about 90 seconds near the end of this short about a man with a big domineering wife, mean mother-in-law and a secretary he'd like to fool around with. They're the Tri-Stone Cops, not the Keystone Kops or Cops, but never mind. Lots of falling down, a fair amount of shooting and some physical comedy. For this they needed *two* directors? **Very** generously, $0.15.

Adding it up, I get a paltry $0.40. Maybe if there were actually four shorts starring the Keystone Cops? Clearly I'm not in awe of early silent-movie slapstick; you may feel differently.

Disc 2

Buster Keaton Festival, all silent (with unrelated music), all b&w, all starring (and written and directed by) Buster Keaton. *The Blacksmith*, 1922, 0:21 [0:19]; *The Boat*, 1921, 0:20 [0:22]; *The Paleface*, 1922, 0:20; *Daydreams*, 1922, 0:18.

Maybe it's because Keaton doesn't deliberately act the clown. Maybe it's because his pictures were really *his* pictures. Whatever the case, these work pretty well.

I'd seen *The Blacksmith* and *The Paleface* on earlier packs (where they counted as full movies). *The Paleface* is pretty clever, *The Blacksmith* is good physical comedy; I'd give each of them $0.35 to $0.50. *The Boat* tells a sad story of boat-building incompetence, very well done for maximum laughs (if you ignore the peril); another $0.50. *Daydreams* feels like a later picture than either *The Blacksmith* or *The Boat*—better photography, more plot, generally very good. Another $0.50. These aren't slapstick, by and large; they're something subtler.

That comes out to $1.70 to $2.00—let's call it $1.75. That's on the high side, but this is an enjoyable 80 minutes (or so) of silent comedy as done by one of the masters.

Buster Keaton Classics, all silent (with unrelated music), all b&w, all starring Buster Keaton. *The Playhouse*, 1921, 0:22 [0:20]; *The Balloonatic*, 1923, 0:22; *My Wife's Relations*, 1922, 0:30 [0:23]; *The Electric House*, 1922, 0:22 [0:20].

The Playhouse (or *Play House)* begins with an **astonishing** five-minute sequence in which Keaton plays all the roles—the conductor, members of the orchestra, a comedy troupe, even the audience (men, women and children alike)—and the playbill shows him in all the roles and stage crew. (Given that this had to be done with in-camera multiple exposures, it's nothing short of astonishing: At one point, there are *nine* Keatons on stage.) After that dream sequence, it's another knockabout comedy set on stage, albeit with a cute side plot in which Keaton's girlfriend is one of identical twins—and he can't tell them apart. Two problems: The comedy troupe includes blackface, maybe "typical for its time" but still unfortunate—and the print's bad enough that it blooms to white in the middle at some points. On balance, $0.35.

The Balloonatic starts at a funhouse and involves balloons and the wilderness—and it's all gags (and, of course, Keaton's indomitable incompetence) with a plot that barely holds together. Maybe I've seen the "holder with no bottom" three or four times too often in Keaton's shorts. This felt forced. $0.20.

My Wife's Relations is based on Keaton unwittingly marrying a big woman with four big, mean brothers (it has to do with Polish judges), being generally beleaguered—Keaton always seems to be a hapless creature—and other nonsense. Decent plot, almost entirely slapstick. Maybe the half-hour version makes more sense. $0.30.

The Electric House offers a Keaton newly graduated from college—but handed the wrong degree, certifying him as an Electrical Engineer when he should have been a Doctor of Botany. The bigwig handing out the degrees wants his new house electrified and offers Keaton the job, while he goes on vacation. Fortunately, the bigwig's daughter tosses Keaton a book, *Electricity Made Easy* or something of the sort. The family returns to a remarkably "electrified" house—with stairs that become escalators, a dining room with self-seating chairs and a model train to serve dishes from the kitchen, an electrified pool table and more. Of course things go wrong in a variety of ways. This one's worth $0.50.

Add them up and I get $1.35, which sounds about right: Watchable but somewhat disappointing, except for the first five minutes and the last short.

Steamboat Bill, Jr., 1928, b&w. Charles Reisner (dir.), Buster Keaton, Tom McGuire, Ernest Torrence, Marion Byron, Tom Lewis. 1:11 [1:09]

Not quite a feature-length film (or maybe it was for the time), this silent has a real plot, loads of physical comedy in Keaton's best form, and a romance—and this time, Keaton wins out in the end. He's the son of a steamboat operator, William "Steamboat Bill" Canfield, with a rundown sternwheeler, just in town (River Junction) from college in Boston—and his girl back in Boston is also in town. She's the daughter of the bigshot, John James King, who's introducing a spiffy new steamboat that will put Steamboat Bill's clunker out of business—especially when King has it condemned. Naturally, King forbids his daughter from seeing Bill Jr. and Bill forbids his son from seeing the girl, in both cases saying "I'll choose the right mate for you," so there's a little Montague-Capulet plot here as well. Father tries to turn son into a proper steamboater (part of which includes a hat-choice sequence that's remarkably good fun), and there's lots more.

Add a lengthy, involved storm sequence (with some astonishing and presumably dangerous stunts and special effects) and Bill Jr.'s unexpected bravery and competence, and you have quite a picture. (You may have heard of the classic and potentially deadly shot where the front of a house falls on Keaton, standing in the street—and happening to be just where an open window frame is. No stunt double, and supposedly some of the crew couldn't stand to watch the filming.) For a change, the music is related to the film—a theater organ track that's apparently composed for the picture, as it includes appropriate sound effects. Good print. Sigh. This is one I'll probably watch again and it's clearly a classic, but I'm

hard-pressed to give more than $1.25 to a one-hour flick. Oh well, it's 1:11 (or 1:09): $2.00.

As You Like It, 1936, b&w. Paul Czinner (dir.), Henry Einley, Elisabeth Bergner, Felix Aylmer, Laurence Olivier. 1:36 [1:27].

From Buster Keaton to William Shakespeare—well, why not? This is not just a filmed play. They expand the scope to natural settings but retain the dialogue. Unfortunately, the first part of the film has a noisy soundtrack, which doesn't help with something as dialogue-heavy as a Shakespeare comedy.

I won't trouble you with the plot. It's all Shakespeare, almost all in the Forest of Arden; the film omits some of the play but apparently adds no new dialogue.

Laurence Olivier—not Sir at that point—stars. It's a generally lively, solid performance. You need *serious* suspension of disbelief for the key conceit in the film: That Orlando (Olivier), deeply in love with Rosalind, cannot recognize her as either Rosalind or as a woman because she is wearing tights and a frilly shirt/blouse rather than a dress, even though she makes no attempt to disguise her hairdo or, really, her voice. But hey, it's a comedy, and there are some fine monologues along the way (including "All the world's a stage"). Because of the soundtrack and missing nine minutes, I can't give it more than $1.25.

Disc 3

Speak Easily, 1932, b&w. Edward Sedgwick (dir.), Buster Keaton, Jimmy Durante, Ruth Selwyn, Thelma Todd, Hedda Hopper, Sidney Toler. 1:22.

Buster Keaton—this time in a full-length *sound* movie (another Buster Keaton Production). He's Professor Potts, living a sheltered life and without enough savings to broaden his horizons. He gets a letter saying he's inherited a fortune and takes off (the letter's actually a phony from Potts' assistant/colleague, designed to get him to take a vacation).

He encounters a truly awful theatrical group led by Jimmy Durante and falls for one of its players. With his fortune backing it, the group goes to Broadway. There's a fair amount of Keaton's physical comedy and fish-out-of-water character throughout, including Potts' first encounter with alcohol—and it all winds up in a remarkable 15-minute theatrical sequence, physical comedy of the highest order as the Professor unintentionally converts the sad-sack show into a hit comedy.

All in all, an enjoyable movie, and the last scenes are both funny and well-played. The print and sound track are both fairly good (with a few flaws). $1.75.

Li'l Abner, 1940, b&w. Albert S. Rogell (dir.), Jeff York, Martha O'Driscoll, Mona Ray, Buster Keaton, Edgar Kennedy, Doodles Weaver. 1:18 [1:10].

Some IMDB reviewers felt that *Speak Easily* was an atrocity as a Buster Keaton movie. I disagree. I'm guessing they haven't seen *this*—which, if viewed as a "Buster Keaton movie" (the sleeve lists him as the star), really *is* an atrocity. He plays Lonesome Polecat, a local Indian (I guess)…and about the best you can say is that he's only in the movie for a few minutes and at least he doesn't have to deal with phony bugeyes, like Pansy 'Mammy' Yokum does, or false noses and other absurd prostheses like many other characters.

It's a comic strip movie. I get that. They use makeup and whatever to make it look as much like the comic strip as possible—to the point of silliness. And, like some other comic strip movies, it's…well, just not very funny, unless you're enormously fond of Appalachian stereotypes. I'll admit I was never a diehard Li"l Abner fan; maybe if I was, I'd love this flick. Maybe the missing eight minutes are wonderful. As it is…the print's not too bad, so I'll give it a reluctant $0.75.

It's a Joke Son, 1947, b&w. Benjamin Stoloff (dir.), Kenny Delmar, Una Merkel, June Lockhart, Kenneth Farrell, Douglass Dumbrille. 1:03.

This movie features a self-caricature, Senator Beauregard Claghorn, a Southern gentleman who hates even the *word* North and orates a fine bold streak—but who's also totally under his wife's thumb. It also involves a teetotaling Southern ladies' club and the effects when Claghorn mixes up the grape punch—aided by a little boy who doesn't read very well and pours in several different bottles of "grape juice"—all of it highly alcoholic. The main plots are the relationship between his daughter (a lovely June Lockhart) and her beau, who Mrs. Claghorn doesn't think is good enough for the daughter (but who he rather takes a liking to), money from his mint farm and a race for the State Senate in which the incumbent is an old fool totally in the pocket of a gang and Mrs. Claghorn is put up for election by the ladies' club.

Thing is, **it's funny**. Claghorn thinks North Carolina should be Upper South Carolina; he still buys Confederate Victory Bonds. (He's slender, well-spoken and fairly good looking; this isn't playing on physical stereotypes. There are also no racial issues involved in the movie.) The title comes from Claghorn's line whenever he says something, I say, says something he deems funny and gets the usual silent response. The acting suits the movie, the action is internally consistent, it moves right along. The 22-year-old June Lockhart is simply stunning and also good in her role (but then, wasn't she always?). (The Claghorn character as played by Kenny Delmar was a regular on the Fred Allen radio show. The Warner Bros. cartoon character Foghorn Leghorn was a takeoff on Clag-

horn.) The print and soundtrack are both fine. Even though it's short, I'll give it $1.75.

Zis Boom Bah, 1941, b&w. William Nigh (dir.), Grace Hayes, Peter Lind Hayes, Mary Healy, Benny Rubin, Richard Gallagher, Roland Dupree, Huntz Hall. 1:01.

This one's tough. On one hand, it's a charming one-hour movie about college, family, song & dance, and kids redeeming themselves—and it has some characters playing themselves. The basic plot: A successful singer whose son (under another name and being raised by his grandfather) is attending college on her dime looks into how it's going, finds the son is a spoiled young man and the college is in trouble, and cuts off his allowance. She buys the local student hangout (there's funny stuff here) and, through various means, winds up saving the college and its football team and turning all the spoiled kids into polished entertainers.

So far so good. Decent print. Decent sound—with one big and, in this case, nearly fatal exception: Whenever there's music, it's distorted enough that it's painful. In a movie that relies heavily on musical numbers, including most of the last quarter of the film, that's a pretty serious flaw. With it, I can't give this more than $0.75.

East Side Kids, 1940, b&w. Robert F. Hill (dir.), Leon Ames, Dennis Moore, Joyce Bryant, Hal Chester, Harris Berger, FrankieBurke, Dave O'Brien. 1:02 {1:00].

Now I remember one reason I put off buying this set: It has at least seven movies with the East Side Kids, and I thought three such flicks in the Family Classics set was at least two too many.

In this case, there's the bad-kid-turned-good-cop bit, with him opening up a club to keep the gang off the street—but his friend's facing execution for something he didn't do, and if that happens, some of the kids will be completely lost. Meanwhile, there's another no-goodnik acquaintance involved with a counterfeiting ring. At one point, the cop himself is the suspect.

I guess it's vintage East Side Kids—but it's before Leo Gorcey and Huntz Hall and is better than the others I've seen. But it wasn't particularly funny. Judged as a comedy, I'm not sure it would get any score at all. Judged as a one-hour flick on its own merits—well, the print's OK. Being *very* generous and assuming some folks just *love* the East Side Kids, $0.75.

Disc 4

Broadway Limited, 1941, b&w. Gordon Douglas (dir.), Victor McLaglen, Marjorie Woodworth, Dennis O'Keefe, Patsy Kelly, Zasu Pitts, Leonid Kinskey, George E. Stone. 1:15.

As a Hollywood starlet (Woodworth) and her producer [Kinskey] (and his secretary [Kelly]) get ready to go from a triumphant premiere in Chicago to one in New York—on the express train, the Broadway Limited—the producer gets the bright idea that the starlet would be more appealing with a baby. A railroad engineer [McLaglen] (who's wooing the smart-mouth secretary) manages to come up with such a baby. The rest of the movie takes place on the train—in sleeping cars, dining car and lounge car (the engineer—deadheading so he can take a vacation—has his very own sleeping room).

But a child has been kidnapped in Chicago and the kid looks a lot like the "adopted" baby. Did I mention that a handsome but poor young doctor [O'Keefe], who would *like* to be wooing the starlet, is also on board? I didn't quite understand the relationship of Myra Prottle [Pitts] to the others, but she's as funny as you'd expect Zasu Pitts to be. The plot moves forward with that vigor that lots of little compartments on a moving train can give a screwball romantic comedy, with people bouncing in and out of rooms and many misunderstandings—and it's a pretty good comedy, well played by all involved. Thoroughly enjoyable; not laugh-a-minute stuff, but very good. A few flaws, but the print's generally fine. (Filmed with the cooperation of the Pennsylvania Railroad using real equipment and trackside shots. Apparently, this flick is loved by railroad fans for its authenticity.) $1.50.

The Stork Club, 1945, b&w. Hal Walker (dir.), Betty Hutton, Barry Fitzgerald, Done DeFore, Robert Benchley, Bill Goodwin. 1:38.

A little old man (Fitzgerald) loses his hat in the wind, and it winds up in the drink—and so does he. A hatcheck girl (Hutton) at the Stork Club, swimming nearby, saves him from drowning. At that point, he looks like a down-on-his-luck type. She gets him a job at the Stork Club as a busboy, which doesn't work out.

But he's not all that down-and-out. He's wealthy, and instructs his lawyer—the wonderful comic writer, Robert Benchley, in a small and relatively straight part—to see to it that the girl's taken care of, without mentioning him. Next thing we know, she's in a 12-room penthouse apartment and has purchased two mink coats and a variety of high-end dresses…and, oh yes, has invited the poor old guy to move in (he takes one of the many rooms).

Her boyfriend shows up—he's a would-be bandleader just out of the service—and makes the natural assumption on seeing a hatcheck girl in an uptown 12-room penthouse with fancy clothes and an old man hanging about. Did I mention that she's also a would-be singer, and a very good one at that?

You can guess most of the rest of the plot. The band can't get work for a couple of weeks, so she has them move into the *other* 12-room flat on the penthouse level. The wife who the old man told to go away four years ago wants him back—and he wants her back,

but won't admit as much. The hatcheck girl begins to assume that the Stork Club's boss is the mysterious benefactor. Everything, of course, gets straightened out by the end. Well done, well played, decent print, a little lightweight. No belly laughs, but an enjoyable comedy of errors with quite a few songs. $1.25.

The Amazing Adventure (aka *The Amazing Quest of Ernest Bliss*), 1936, b&w. Alfred Zeisler (dir.), Cary Grant, Mary Brian, Peter Gawthorne. 1:20/1:02 (1:02 here).

A charming little movie, one that's a full-fledged feature despite its short length (apparently 18 minutes shorter than the original). Cary Grant plays Ernest Bliss, a wealthy young London socialite, inherited wealth, who feels lousy. A physician informs him that he feels lousy because he doesn't *do* anything and is sort of worthless; this physician also runs a clinic for the less fortunate. The physician says Bliss could never last a year on his own devices, without being propped up by his fortune. Bliss makes a bet: 50,000 pounds to the clinic if he fails to do just that, an apology and handshake if he succeeds.

The rest of the movie is about the socialite's quest to make it on his own, starting with nothing but one suitcase of clothes and a five-pound note. Along the way, he meets and courts a young woman who's not wealthy either—and who almost rejects him at the last moment because she needs money to care for her sister, and that makes money worth more than love.

All well played, and, come on, it's a romantic comedy: Of course it all works out in the end. The print is OK, but the sound is distorted whenever there's music—which, given that portions of the film are set either in a high-class nightclub or in a charming little everyday-folks restaurant that has music, is a real problem. Given that, I'll say $1.25.

My Love for Yours (aka *Honeymoon in Bali*), 1939, b&w. Edward H. Griffith (dir.), Fred MacMurray, Madeleine Carroll, Allan Jones, Akim Tamiroff, Helen Broderick, Osa Massen. 1:35 [1:40].

Attractive, independent woman (Carroll) who's executive VP of a department store, makes lots of money, has no room for marriage or kids—and whose somewhat older female friend (Broderick) notes the regret of being too independent too long. Opera-singer (Jones), dear friend of the VP who's loved her from afar but knows she doesn't love him. American man (MacMurray) who lives in Bali shows up, young girl in tow, and immediately falls for her—but he's skeptical of the whole independent-woman theory. And there's a young woman from Bali who's wealthy and wants this guy for her very own. Oh, and there's a wise middle-aged window washer (Tamiroff, in a good if small role).

Need I bother with the rest of the plot? No, I thought not. It's a romantic comedy. The print's fine. The sound's fine. The acting's OK (Fred MacMurray is a little too brash for his own good, but that's in keeping.) And…well, it's mildly amusing, no more than that. (There's also a supposedly south-seas song with a one-line lyric repeated over and over, and it's *truly* irritating.) A bit of a disappointment. $1.25.

Disc 5

All four movies on this disc star the East Side Kids in various permutations. My tolerance for repeated doses of these charming JDs is limited, so I interleaved Hitchcock and East Side Kids movies.

Clancy Street Boys, 1943, b&w. William Beaudine (dir.), Leo Gorcey, Huntz Hall, Bobby Jordan, Noah Beery. 1:29/1:06 [1:05]

Muggs' late father used to brag to his brother that he had seven kids, slightly exaggerating from the one. Since then, the brother—a wealthy Texan—has been sending seven birthday checks each year. Now the brother's coming to town… And Muggs' uses the Kids to act as his brothers (and one sister). A slick local hoodlum somehow uses this as an excuse to kidnap the Texan. The kids save the day.

Not terrible, but nothing special. Huntz Hall in drag (as the sister) may be a highlight. I guess you have to be a fan. Some missing clips. Very charitably, $0.75.

Pride of the Bowery, 1940, b&w. Joseph H. Lewis (dir.), Leo Gorcey, Bobby Jordan, Kenneth Howell, Mary Ainslee, Bobby Stone, David Gorcey, Kenneth Harlan. 1:01 [1:00]

This time, Muggs wants to train as a boxer for the Golden Gloves—and his pal sets up a way to get him fresh air and lots of training. How? By signing the whole gang up for a Civilian Conservation Corps camp. After initial issues, Muggs and the gang take to the situation fairly well (the $22 a month going back to his mom doesn't hurt). The movie involves boxing and honor, and portrays Muggs as a prince among kids, maybe too much so.

I liked this one better. Maybe it was the outdoors or the filming (which seemed more natural than some, although the print has some damage and a persistent flare in a lower corner). Maybe it was the plot and the acting. It certainly wasn't a laugh-fest, but it was more enjoyable than I expected. As a one-hour second-feature, I'll give it $1.

Smart Alecks, 1942, b&w. Wallace Fox (dir.), Leo Gorcey, Bobby Jordan, Huntz Hall, Max "Slapsie Maxie" Rosenbloom, Gale Storm. 1:07 [1:05]

The plot this time: The Gang wants uniforms to play baseball, but has no money. Older brother (or friend?) of one of them drops by in suit, offers mon-

ey—but they assume it's "dirty money" and they don't take dirty money. Turns out they're right—he's a lookout for bank robbers. One thing leads to another, there's a scene in which one of the robbers (Rosenbloom) grabs nearly half of a cake that a nurse (sister of one of the gang, played by Gale Storm) baked for the gang and Muggs retaliates by spiking extra frosting (and adding alum to coffee).

The rest has to do with loyalty in various ways. Probably fine for what it is, although unless you're a big fan of Muggs' malapropos and gestures, most of the humor is in the cake-doctoring scene. The print's good and it's over an hour, but I can't give it more than $1.

Mr. Wise Guy, 1942, b&w. William Nigh (dir.), Leo Gorcey, Bobby Jordan, Huntz Hall, Billy Gilbert, Guinn Williams, Joan Barclay. 1:10 [0:58].

It's clear that the only way I could make it through four of these is by breaking them up with early Hitchcock flicks—but it also works the other way around. Still, it's a relief to get to the last one; if only I wasn't aware that the next disc has two more.

There's one good comic moment, very near the beginning: The gang are outside a bakery, a brick comes through the window, the cops show up and start to haul them in—and the baker says "nah, I'm just clumsy, that was me." After that, the plot revolves around an escaped convict who supposedly drowned trying to swim to shore, a "stolen" truck that the gang gets blamed for (and all get sent to the reformatory, where they have spiffy uniforms and seem happy enough), a robbery gone bad that winds up with an entirely innocent older brother of one of the gang (who was forced to drive a getaway car) convicted of murder…and, of course, the gang saving the day.

I can't think of anything particularly good or bad to say about this one. It seems like more of the same old, same old, and you really have to love Leo Gorcey to much care about this group of semi-juvenile semi-delinquents. Charitably, $0.75.

Disc 6

Million Dollar Kid, 1944, b&w. Wallace Fox (dir.), Leo Gorcey, Huntz Hall, Gabriel Dell, William 'Billy" Benedict, Louise Currie, Noah Berry, Herbert Heyes, Johnnny Duncan. 1:05.

Yet another East Side Kids flick—but one of the more heartwarming, if you can deal with the premise of this large band of young adults with no jobs, no visible means of income but also a firm opposition to any *actual* criminal activity. ("Young adults" gets to be more of a stretch over time…)

In this one, the Kids hear about muggings taking place on their turf that could damage their reputation. They encounter one of them: three punks taking on an older man. They fight off the punks, rescue the man…and find his wallet in the trash, money intact. Then the cops pick them up, but the man comes to the police station and identifies them as his saviors. He convinces them to drop by his house (there's a nice little class-warfare scene involving the butler) where he shows them a well-equipped gym and invites them to use it. They also meet his daughter, a looker who Muggs falls for instantly.

Rest of the plot? One son's a pilot overseas; the other seems a little lost (and spends his time in a pool hall filled with unsavory characters). The daughter's semi-engaged to a Frenchman who seems a little off…and her father's managed to alienate most of the servants so she's not sure who can cook or serve at a party she wants to throw. The Kids provide the cook and servant, and along the way discover that the Frenchman's a grifter with a phony accent (and reveal that to her in the right way), the son was one of the muggers (but he's mostly confused, not really bad), and manage to convince the son to clean up his act. All sweetness and light, and occasionally amusing—and for a change the Kids get along pretty well with the cops. Unfortunately, the sound track is noisy and there are just enough missing frames to be annoying. $0.75.

Bowery Blitzkrieg, 1941, b&w. Wallace Fox (dir.), Leo Gorcey, Bobby Jordan, Huntz Hall, Keye Luke and the usual gang. 1:02 [0:59]

This time the plot concerns Muggs being sent to reform school on a phony charge, getting out as long as he's training (as a Police Athletic League rep) for a boxing tournament, claims by a local hood that he's getting Muggs to throw the bout and lots more. The culmination: Muggs donates blood to save his pal (that's all involved with the bout-throwing; it's complicated and has to do with some of the less ethical or more stupid ESKs) on the day of the Big Bout…but all comes out OK in the end, of course.

That's a short summary because I didn't write it up right after seeing the film, and there was really no long-term memory of the movie. It was OK, better than some, and—as with most of these—really for people who *love* Leo Gorcey and the gang. For that crowd, I'll give it $1.

Three Broadway Girls (aka *The Greeks Had a Word for Them*), 1932, b&w. Lowell Sherman (dir.), Joan Blondell, Madge Evans, Ina Claire, David Manners, Lowell Sherman. 1:19.

Not an East Side Kids picture. It's a comedy about three gold-diggers, whose methods are tipped off by an opening title, noting that half of the women in the world are working women—and the other half are working the men. It's amusing, and all three women are interesting characters, but it's also a bit forced:

One of the three *repeatedly* undermines any chance for happiness or love by the others, and you'd think the other two would freeze her out at some point. But that would be serious, and there's nothing serious about this flick. It's amusing, it's distinctly amoral in a pre-Code way, and I'll give it $1.25.

Swing High, Swing Low, 1937, b&w. Mitchell Leisen (dir.), Carole Lombard, Fred MacMurray, Charles Butterworth, Jean Dixon, Dorothy Lamour, Anthony Quinn. 1:32 [1:22]

Comedy? Really? Maybe a musical romantic "comedy," but even that's a stretch. Maggie, working on a cruise ship, meets Skid (Fred MacMurray), just getting out of the army, while on her way through the Panama Canal locks. She winds up with him in a nightclub, there's a brawl, they wind up in jail, she's stranded… He turns out to be a great trumpet player.

Events ensue. They get married. He gets a great offer to play in New York—and he'll send for her later. He's a big hit. Except that another woman, the singer in New York, Anita Alvarez (Dorothy Lamour), makes sure he's always broke and, when Maggie takes a ship to New York on her own, makes sure he doesn't get the telegram to meet her…and takes him back to her room.

Maggie gets a divorce. He falls apart completely—even though he's really never spent much time with her and has always treated her badly, as far as we can tell. It all ends well, I guess—but I never quite see why she doesn't just dump this self-centered schmuck and go marry the cattleman who clearly loves her. Maybe I'm just not romantic enough. Maybe the missing 10 minutes is important.

Ah, but it has Lombard, MacMurray, Lamour and more—there's also Charles Butterworth doing a fine turn as a piano player and others doing good work. Well photographed, reasonably well acted, some good music. As a comedy, though, it's a washout. Charitably, $1.25.

Summing Up

Twenty-six movies or collections of shorts. One movie I'd call a true classic, *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*. Three more come close: the collection titled *Buster Keaton Festival* and the movies *Speak Easily* and *It's a Joke Son*. Also very good and worth rewatching: *Broadway Limited*. Plus eight more flicks worth $1.25 each (possibly worth rewatching) and three more at $1.00 (so-so).

That's not bad—figure $20.50 for those 15 movies. The other eleven I could do without, although none were so bad as to get $0 or $0.25 ratings.

One obvious factor surprises me, since I thought I wasn't particularly fond of Buster Keaton: He's the star of three of the four best pictures (or collections) in this group. One obvious factor doesn't surprise me at all: The East Side Kids strike me as neither funny nor uplifting.

Total for this half: $27.50. Not bad for half of a $12-$15 set.

Making it Work
Library 2.0 Revisited

It's been 17 months since the last discussion of Library 2.0-related items (March 2008)—and that was a narrow discussion. The most recent *general* discussion of Library 2.0 was back in September 2007, 23 months ago. In the meantime, I decided against doing a revised *Balanced Libraries* incorporating the original LIBRARY 2.0 AND "LIBRARY 2.0," in part because others suggested that Library 2.0 was very old news.

Meanwhile, the term continues to be used—and that special issue continues to be viewed and downloaded *now* more than almost any current issue. One systems vendor has a whole podcast series using that name. A Google blog search shows "about 79,817" results, including "about 2,421" in the past month. Lots of those are trivial mentions, I'm sure—but the term continues to be bandied about as though it means something, and there's clearly still interest in whatever that something is.

The items here range over nearly two years (since September 4, 2007), a period during which Google blog search shows about 31,825 results for the phrase "Library 2.0." Even if there were only the 828 items Google actually *shows*, that's a lot of activity. Most of them date from late 2007 and early 2008—since then, I've subconsciously or deliberately paid little attention to Library 2.0-related posts.

I hope this doesn't come off as either a reasoned dissertation on Contemporary Use of the Library 2.0 Meme or a deadly serious overview. It's summer. This is a once-over-lightly on things that caught my fancy.

Most of the items noted are in chronological order. Incidentally, starting now, if the URL for a blog is obvious or easily discoverable (e.g., www.laughinglibrarian.com), *I'm omitting it*—particularly since blogs can and do change platforms.

Library 2.0 and library science

This piece by Brian Smith appeared on *The laughing librarian* on September 4, 2007. He takes off from some of the 2.0-related posts on *Annoyed librarian*. Smith doesn't care for the term AL uses, twopointopian, but thinks "twodotnaughty" would work in some cases. Some of what he says:

> Maybe things have changed, but back then, the real problem with at least some twodotnaughties is they sometimes spewed bullshit.
>
> We don't mean bullshit in the sense of "ideas we don't agree with". We mean bullshit in the sense of bullshit. Example: We heard two different speakers at two different events mislead (one of them outright lying to) their audiences about the number of user comments that Ann Arbor District Library was getting on its website. That's bullshit, deceptive bullshit. We sincerely hope that twodotnaughties aren't still talking about opening up a blog for comments as a way to build community. At least not without also mentioning that the average number of comments made on a public library blog item is, when rounded to the nearest whole number, zero. This is even true of Ann Arbor if you don't count the articles about video games.
>
> At least, that's our hypothesis, based on a quick glance at things. Great project for a library school student: Examine library blogs with dedicated rigor—to hell with anecdotal evidence—and test our hypothesis. How much "community" is being built? Put a little actual science into library science. The data's just sitting there like a big, dead toad of data, waiting to be resuscitated through the amphibian CPR of reasoned analysis…

As far as I know, no library school student undertook such a study, and that may not be surprising: It's a hellaciously big project yielding results nobody much wants to know about. I know. When that post appeared, I was just finishing *precisely* such a study of public library blogs and working on a similar study of academic library blogs. Smith's hypothesis was right on the money:

- For the three-month period studied, the 252 public library blogs had a *total* of 1,768 comments—but nearly one-quarter of those were related to gaming posts on the Ann Arbor blog. Technically, Smith's wrong—the average (mean) number of comments per blog was seven—but realistically he's right: the *median* number of comments was zero, with only 118 of 252 blogs having *any* comments and only 13 averaging more than two per week.
- The numbers were worse for the 231 academic library blogs: A total of 575 comments, an average of 2.5 comments, only 86 blogs with any comments (thus, another zero median), and four blogs out of 231 averaging at least two comments per week.

What's new about Library 2.0? Shift in power

That's what Kathryn Greenhill says, in a September 10, 2007 post at *Librarians matter.* She begins by disclaiming the name itself: "I've made no secret of the fact that I think Library 2.0 is a dumb name for a set of very useful new ways to look at our libraries." She also points to a few other places—including Jennifer Macaulay's "Library 2.0 roundup—Redux" (scruffynerf.wordpress.com/2007/09/04/library-20-roundup-redux/), one of the best roundups through early September 2007.

Greenhill says (good) libraries have *always* been user-focused—and Library 2.0 isn't just about new tools. She sees a power shift in several areas. Excerpting and summarizing:

- **The power of the user to choose**: There have never been so many alternatives to libraries as information resources… When users reach for an information source, the convenience of these services often outweighs the quality of our library sources. *Challenge*: To use new web tools to increase the convenience of access to our information resources.
- **The power of the librarians to control code**: Libraries have developed Open Source Library Management Systems...
- **The power of the user to create their library**: With the technology to add comments, ratings and reviews to items in our catalogues…
- **The power of librarians to speak with our own voices**: Social software generally involves an informal voice, where any hint of b*llshit or corporate speak is firmly put in its place....
- **The power of librarians to be in our users' space**: …Services like chat reference, widgets and gadgets let us offer our services using the users' tools, instead of making them come to us.
- **The power of librarians to risk**:… If a tool is imperfect, but does a few things really well, users are far more forgiving then they would have been five years ago. This doesn't mean that we should try every half baked idea that comes our way, but losing the "culture of perfect" does give us more scope to try newer things sooner…
- **The power of librarians to collaborate**: New web tools make it much easier to collaborate with a wider group of people quicker…
- **The power to use our library buildings in a new way**: The library is no longer defined by its bookstock in a physical building….

I like much of this, and am almost hesitant to suggest some mild overstatements. I'll note one thing: The suggestion that bullshit in blogs is immediately and soundly "put in its place" sounds nice—but that's not how it works in practice, at least not for the most powerful voices in various circles. I would also suggest that, at

least for most American public libraries, the bookstock in physical buildings continues (and will continue) to be a critical factor, if not the only definition.

We got 2.0 librarians, not 2.0 libraries

While my September 2007 discussion covered Ryan Deschamps' post and some early reactions, it was already out when Michelle Boule posted this response on September 20, 2007 at *A wandering eyre*. Some of what she has to say:

> Library 2.0 has succeeded in nothing as well as creating a group of frustrated 2.0 Librarians. L2 has done a wonderful job of educating, enlightening, and invigorating librarians to be better, to do better, and to involve our patrons. We are reaching a critical mass of librarians who are excited about what is possible. The problem is that many of those librarians are stuck in 1.0 libraries…
>
> [B]eing 2.0 in a 1.0 library means extreme frustration with the glacial pace of change, immovable people and policies, or any other number of things that make you wonder why you bother. Sometimes it means banging your head against a wall that will never move. Being 2.0 in a 1.0 environment can foster independence, confidence and innovative thinking… It can be a positive thing, a testing of your wits. Eventually though, the challenge can wear you down.
>
> 2.0 Librarians usually end up leaving for somewhere better, more innovative. This is a great option if you are mobile and able to move. Not everyone can. This "brain drain" has resulted in a hand full of libraries doing really great stuff, a few more libraries sticking toes in the water, and the majority of libraries looking around in befuddlement. I would not be afraid to guess that in many 1.0 libraries, there are 2.0 librarians working behind the scenes and those librarians are tired…

Deschamps responds in *The real pangs of Librarian 2.0*, posted September 25, 2007 at *The other librarian*. Excerpts:

> …Whereas some are calling for radical change, I am willing to work with steady forward progress. Why? Well here are some good reasons:
>
> **I could be bored to death waiting for a Second Life patron to visit our Second Life Library**: I have been on Second Life three times recently at different times of the day and all three times, no one was there. Not librarians. Not anyone. Right now, the supply of Second Life libraries far exceeds the demand…
>
> **I could have a totally RSS'd up website that users hate**: I love RSS. I think the model of library service that RSS enables is great too—get the library news where you get your local news… Email is still the major mode of information access—for librarians and regular public. RSS will grow, but for now, it is absolutely on the margins of information access points.
>
> **I could put out big promises in an arena where we cannot meet expectations**: Our customers expect us to know everything about technology. We do not. If we put out a service, people will expect us to be able to help them get at it. If they cannot, they will ask us for help. If, when they ask us for help, and staff go "Flickr, who?" we look absolutely dumb. That is why I keep on harping on the training benefits of something like Learning 2.0.
>
> **I could be evil:**…Web 2.0 doesn't really address the digital divide in specific terms. Putting out services that benefit a few, high-tech oriented users at the cost (however minimal) of services that may directly resolve serious community needs is evil. We can't call ourselves professionals unless we put time and thought into ethics of a new service.
>
> **Process matters**:…Librarian 2.0 has to ask his or herself "is this resistance to change flat-out stubbornness or due process?" If it's the former, than I think Michelle is right—we are going to see people moving away from the laggard libraries and fighting for jobs in the innovative (and probably resource rich) libraries. If it's the latter, I think librarian 2.0 needs to hold on for a moment and look at how to move forward… The important thing is to think your way through the problem and focus less on a "golden age" of library 2.0 and more on the next positive step in that direction. Sometimes gradual is better; sometimes gradual is faster…

I'm not sure what I can add to that dialogue. I must admit an evil thought that someday, someone should do a cost-per-transaction study of *non-librarian* transactions (reference questions, program attendance, whatever) in all the Second Life libraries and library-related things, when full costs (including not only direct SL costs but staff time spent) are included. At some point, "we're spending time and money to learn about it because it's The Wave of the Future" begins to ring a little hollow.

So what would a 2.0 library look like?

Jeff Scott asks that question in a September 26, 2007 post at *Gather no dust*. He recognizes that there's no clear destination, but thinks he has some feel for what a "2.0 library" might be like. Excerpts:

> If we look at the issue in a macro term, we stop thinking about a library and we begin to think about service. We then begin to think about what type of service is best for a community. The 2.0 part is how that service is communicated and implemented. How much control is relinquished so that the individuals in that community decide the best library services?...

ILL 2.0: …Allowing patrons to order ILLs at will. They have direct control of the interface and can order what they want. The library with the book processes the order, the book is sent to the library, and the patron picks it up…

Collection Development 2.0: … Allowing patrons to order what books they wanted for the library to own…have the patrons order them directly…. This is a little extreme and would need some tabs on the process (like a patron could order only so many books, requires a card in good standing, etc.)

Programming 2.0/Space 2.0: [If] a patron wants a program, have them perform the program, or contact the programmer to come down and the library helps with advertisement and other administrative items… If patrons want to come in and do something on their own, whether it is to have a club meeting, have an impromptu storytime, or set up a Wii tournament, they would have the space to do so. Providing the equipment is another step. Patrons could bring their own and the library can adapt its resources so that is always freely available…

Reference 2.0: Reference could work the same way, having resident experts that can provide reference help on topics…

Equipment 2.0: …A successful library should be able to provide and sustain new technologies, provide training for those new technologies, and provide space for collaboration and the ability to play with these new technologies…

ILS 2.0: The social opac should allow a patron to set-up their account originally using their library barcode number and a pin. After that, they should be allowed to set up their own unique username and password that only they would know. They could set up a profile and make it public if they wish. It can provide items they have tagged or commented upon in the catalog, books they have ILL'd, books they have read, books they have reviewed, books they have requested or ordered, articles from databases they have saved or shared, and other thoughts on how the library can improve their services…

What is the difference between libraries that exist now and a library that is 2.0? …The difference between benevolent despotism and a democracy.

So what are the barriers? Money and staff time are major barriers… A library that can create this environment will need to do the following:

1. Have enough money as a buffer to provide this level of service

2. Be able to cut funding in other areas to provide that funding in these areas

3. Provide a long term plan to allow space, equipment, and flexibility to change.

There's a lot more to the post, but this is the gist. Is this a fair definition of the ultimate goals of Library 2.0? It certainly resonates with Kathryn Greenhill's post (above).

We know what Library 2.0 is and is not

That astonishing claim appears as the title of an October 31, 2007 post by Michael Casey and Laura Savastinuk at *LibraryCrunch*. My first reaction, as you might expect, was "Puhleaze…" or some less polite version. The title is repeated as the first paragraph. Excerpts:

> …What does Library 2.0 mean to you and your organization? What is it that you want Library 2.0 to do for your users? If you don't know the answer to these questions, you must figure them out before you begin implementing new services and programs…
>
> Energy focused on implementing new tools and programs is wasted if we don't know what our users really want. Without knowing that, we create more work for ourselves with hit or miss initiatives.
>
> In the past two years much of the discussion of Library 2.0 has been focused on little things we can do to better serve our users… It is inspiring to see so many libraries creating new ways to reach their users.
>
> However, we have to be careful to not flood ourselves with new projects until we have a clear understanding of what it is we're trying to do and where we want to go. And in the spirit of Library 2.0, that means first figuring out what our users want and need…
>
> **Library 2.0 is user-centric**. It is a shift in our focus from having libraries decide what is best for users to letting users decide what they want, how they want to get it, and how we can best serve them… It is imperative that we do the research before we throw programs and initiatives at them. Otherwise, we're the ones deciding what our users want and need–a concept that is decidedly not Library 2.0.
>
> **Library 2.0 is constant change and evaluation**. Once we've decided to implement a new service or program, we must continually revisit and evaluate it…
>
> **Library 2.0 is *not* just about technology**… While technology can be a tool to better serve our users, it is not the final answer to all of our problems.
>
> **Library 2.0 is political**... We have to get not only our staff and administration on board–we also have to get our library boards, community leaders, and users on board as well. And the best way to do that is to talk to them–let them know that we all share a common goal of providing access to all kinds of information.
>
> We've heard from countless librarians who have encountered some form of resistance in their organization to Library 2.0. Why is that? As has been said from the beginning, the spirit and driving force of Library 2.0 is the same tenet that has been a fundamental part of li-

> brary service for decades–providing our users with access to information. Library 2.0 strives to reach this goal in part through customer-driven services…
>
> If we focus too much on the details and specific programs before we can explain what it is our users want, then our communities, administrators, library boards, and staff may well rebel against Library 2.0 without ever truly understanding what it is about.
>
> We hope that some conversation can be focused back on the fundamental concepts of Library 2.0, the efforts and resistance for change, and how to figure out what our users really want from us.

As an *assertion* of what "Library 2.0" *should* be about, this is interesting. Also interesting that the writers profess not to understand why there's resistance to Library 2.0, a statement that seems disingenuous.

The comments were also interesting. Steven Chabot noted that "the solutions proposed by Library 2.0 *are* mostly about technology" (emphasis added)…and notes that libraries tend to adopt easy tech fixes (blogs, Second Life, wikis) without determining whether there's a demand or even desire for those things. Jenny Levine argued for what users "need" rather than what they "want"—and cites RSS as one of those. She also said, "while L2 proponents can generally agree on philosophy, I think all of our personal definitions are a little different" and that "L2" can't be boiled down to four tenets. Key here, I think, is that Levine was (I stress *was*, not *is*) within that group that felt it was perfectly appropriate for Library 2.0 librarians to establish not only details but specific programs without *any* actual input from users, because the librarians know better. I don't believe you can reconcile Levine's view (shared by many other early Library 2.0 proponents, based on my reading) with the post here as representing a single, shared definition, particularly since the post says that for librarians to decide what users want and need is "decidedly not Library 2.0."

Meredith Farkas offered a careful comment that, among other things, said "each of us brings a different spin to Library 2.0. It doesn't have one official definition. No one owns it. No one 'knows what it is and is not' for anyone but themselves." That yielded a *remarkable* response from Laura Savastinuk, given the title and approach of the post itself: "I think you misunderstand. 'We' is collective—it is all of us, understanding it for ourselves." Meredith responded, noting that several of us (myself included) "misconstrued" the title of the post as meaning Michael and Laura. You know, 21 months later, reading the same title and the same post, I *still* can't read it as saying "the library field as a whole knows what Library 2.0 is and is not, and here's what we all agree on." Nor do I believe that there was—or is—any such generally agreed definition.

Empirical research and Library 2.0

Steven Chabot wrote a longer commentary on the previous post on October 31, 2007 at *Subject/Object* (subjectobject.net). He begins with a striking statement: "I'm sorry. Library 2.0 is NOT user centric."

He loves the statement (quoted above) on focusing energy on implementation without knowing what users really want—but "can't really stomach" the opening line, saying that opening a debate about definitions of Library 2.0 might be much more productive. Then things get really interesting…

> "Library 2.0 is *not* just about technology," say Casey and Savastinuk. Which is a fine attitude to have–although I am of the camp that believes if it is not technology, **it is really just librarianship**. If what is left of the concept is user-centrism, change and evolution, and politics, then librarians who do not do these things are bad librarians. Good librarians have always been user-centric. They were user-centric in the "public education" era of the library, where they suggested books at "the people's university." They were user-centric when they began to offer readers' advisory of popular fiction, when that came in demand. [Emphasis added]
>
> However, the solutions proposed by Library 2.0 are *mostly* about technology. Casey and Savastinuk agree: "No matter how much this is said, technology continues to be a leading topic of discussion."
>
> And why is that? Because technology gets visible results quickly and cheaply. People believe that the library is missing a certain segment of the population–or perhaps it is that a certain segment are missing the library? Regardless, librarians want to do something. So they start a blog (without questioning if the missing population reads blogs) or they have a wiki (without questioning if there is a demand for a wiki) or a Second Life presence (without questioning whether there are people looking for their library on SL).
>
> I completely agree with Casey and Savastinuk: we focus too much on solutions before understanding the problems. And I think that suggesting these technological solutions is specifically not user-centric in this case. ***Suggesting technologies is librarian centric.*** The problem is that proponents of LIbrary 2.0 rely too little on empirical research about what users need and about their perspectives. ***Giving them technologies is telling them what they want, not giving them what they need.*** The solution librarians always suggest is more technology. And the suggestion they rarely suggest is to slow down and listen to people.

There's more, but that's the heart, and I think it's an important statement that was all too true at the time.

Is it still true? How many libraries have instituted blogs *after* studying public needs and how many have done so *without* such studies? Second Life libraries, anyone? I'd **love** to see an objective study showing that a majority of "Library 2.0" technology initiatives instituted in 2007-2008 were based on actual user study or input. If anyone knows of such a study, *let me know*: I'll happily publicize it here. Have Library 2.0 initiatives become truly user-centric *for the users of a given library*, or is "user-centric" given lip service?

In comments, Leo Klein says *every* new library fashion or fad—"particularly related to technology"—has claimed itself to be user-centric, including text-based databases and user-configurable web portals. "Tracy" asked about the difference between giving users what the need and what they want, says "there is obviously a huge difference there," and asks who defines what it is they *need*. Chabot, in the final comment, responds thoughtfully (quoting in full):

> Well, I would assume that would be handled by qualified professionals, with degrees whose training emphasizes qualitative and quantitative studies of user populations, and who have a firm grounding in what it takes to live and work in a democratic society and an information economy. We give other professionals, like police and firefighters, the power to decide for us based on their training. Yes, librarians are not as critical as doctors, but we don't expect a decade of education for librarians either.
>
> As I have noted, the debate between give them what they need and give them what they want goes far back in the library literature, and it is not a debate easily solved. I think it is up to each librarian to come down in a particular place on the sliding scale between the two. As a soon-to-be academic librarian, I think that our educational imperative looms larger for me; however, the public library once had an educational imperative as well.
>
> The point I hoped I was trying to make was that it is extremely questionable that the technologies and services promoted as "Library 2.0″ is either what users need or what users want. I think too many assumptions are made, and I think that needs analysis is a necessity. To that point, conducting needs analyses and implementing services is not Library 2.0, it is just good librarianship.
>
> Thank you for your comment, I think it is an important point.

A few days later, Chabot added "Part 2" to this post, after discovering a related post at *The proletarian librarian*, "All things in moderation." Proletarian quotes much of the "We know…" and adds a few comments, including this one:

> I'm all for finding out what our users want and how they want to get it. I'm also ***for*** attempting to guide our users towards quality materials and services and I'm afraid that often Library 2.0 chastises librarians who hold this belief.

To which Chabot adds

> I don't think this chastising is unique to Library 2.0, but it does crop up in a lot of the rhetoric so-called progressive librarians make and have made against so-called conservative librarians. We've heard it before in the Reader's Advisory movement of the 1980's: who are we to say what reading is good and bad. And now, who are we to say what information outlets are good and bad. We should, as they argue, give them what they want.

It's *certainly* true that, for materials, "give 'em what they want" isn't particularly part of Library 2.0 and predates the concept by a couple of decades. I'm not even sure I'd lay that particular form of chastisement at the feet of Library 2.0 proponents.

Library 2.0—edited to add: Thing 2

This February 4, 2008 post by Aurora Jacobsen at *super turbo* (superturbo.blogspot.com) is part of a 23 things program and particularly interesting as a two-years-later response to one of the fundamental early Library 2.0 posts by John Blyberg (apparently "required reading" on the 23 Things page). As Jacobsen reads Blyberg, she thinks he assumes that libraries currently aren't relevant or will become irrelevant. She has a problem with this:

> Circulation has, for the most part, steadily increased since 1990. How is that proving our irrelevance? But somehow, all the library literature out there acts as if libraries are some decaying being. That bothers me. We fail as librarians in buying into the hype that libraries are dying on the vine, without actually looking at the situation very critically. I think that is one of the main failings of Library 2.0--it's all about poking holes into institutions that may, yes, sometimes need a finger in their direction--but it seems to be poking those holes at random with no real evaluation going on.
>
> I don't think I'm alone in this frustration. I think a lot of librarians have tuned out of Library 2.0 for that very reason--**it's calling anything that came before it a failure**. Libraries were not failing before this buzzword came into being. They were reexamining their place in the world-- as most institutions do. [Emphasis added]

Jacobsen strongly supports the 23 Things program and believes in things that make us a little uncomfortable—but puts it a different way: "I don't think libraries were broken—but I always think we should push ourselves a little bit." I would take issue with the comment that "all the library literature out there acts

as if libraries are some decaying being"—*Cites & Insights* most certainly does not, and there are others in my camp—but I hear what she's saying.

Mary Beth Sancomb-Moran, also involved in the 23 Things program, noted Jacobsen's post and added these comments in a February 5, 2008 post at *Impromptu librarian* (impromptu.wordpress.com):

> Good point, and one that hadn't consciously occurred to me, but was instead lingering in the back of my mind. Libraries are relevant and are important--and aren't failing as institutions. It's not that what we're doing is wrong, but much of the Library 2.0 literature insinuates that we are. You're old, you're antiquated, you're outdated, and you're losing your clientele. Hmpf. No wonder so many librarians are a bit put off by the whole thing.
>
> Look, libraries are still doing what we're best at doing--finding stuff and organizing it so people can find it. We're the keepers of the information, and we'll gently take you by the hand and help you find it. It's what we've been doing for a very, very long time, and it's what we'll continue to do. So chin up, Dear Librarian. You're doing wonderful things.
>
> So, what about this Library 2.0 stuff? Well, they're swell new tools that can help you do your job better, that's all. For all of the hype and occasional hysteria, all of these things are tools. Nothing more, nothing less. Some of the tools will fit better for some libraries than others. Some of the tools may not fit your situation at all. But not every tool works for every job – that's why we have toolboxes with many, many tools. Don't use a hammer when a wrench will work better.

I'm inclined to agree with Sancomb-Moran—and I find it nearly impossible to reconcile that informal definition of Library 2.0 with the definition "we" have.

Jumping Forward to 2009

I'm sure I could find hundreds of other interesting posts mentioning Library 2.0 between February 5, 2008 and March 14, 2009—but I'm not going to. (Some will doubtless turn up in other MAKING IT WORK essays devoted to other, more substantive topics.) If nothing else, this essay is already too long…(but it's over 100 outside, it's summer and I'm too tired to make it shorter.)

A pair of posts from March 2009 deserves some attention, though.

It's not all about the tech—why 2.0 tech fails

Meredith Farkas posted this on March 14, 2009 at *Information wants to be free* (meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/). She recounts a talk she did for the 2009 ACRL virtual conference:

> In the beginning of my talk, I showed screenshots of library blogs that haven't been posted to, MySpace pages that haven't been logged into, and podcasts that haven't had new episodes in years. And I talked about some of the reasons why these 2.0 projects may have failed:
>
> The first reason is that frequently social software implementations are not tied to institutional goals. Research has shown that libraries have been much more successful in marketing information literacy instruction when it's tied to University goals/General Education requirements/etc. It's the same with 2.0 technologies. Whatever we're doing should be tied to the library's strategic goals and planning. If it's not tied to the library's goals, then how will it be seen as a priority?
>
> Similarly, 2.0 technologies should be planned for in a strategic way, which I think has not happened at a lot of libraries. Some libraries jumped on the blogging bandwagon because they thought (or were told) that every library must have a blog. Other libraries started wikis because staff were really excited about the idea of having a wiki. Neither are good reasons to implement a technology. We first need to understand the needs of our population (be it patrons or staff) and then implement whatever technology and/or service will best meet those needs. We need to have clear goals in mind from the outset so that we can later assess if it's successful or not. These technologies may be fun, but they're simply tools. We don't walk around with hammers looking for nails to smash in…

There's a *lot* more to the post—e.g., cases where social software is someone's pet project, the sheer ease of starting "2.0" initiatives without a plan for maintaining them, 2.0 initiatives that aren't provided ongoing *time* to maintain them, and some considerations before shutting down a "failing" project. This portion, though, relates most directly to Library 2.0 as a theme.

The krafty librarian responded on March 19, 2009, saying (in part):

> Just because you can do something doesn't mean you should. There are a ton of blog and wiki corpses littering the Internet these days and libraries have their fair percentage of them. Knowing about these tools *and* when we need to apply them is the important message that gets lost sometimes. However, we can only do that if we keep our eyes and ears open. Running out and starting a blog just because everybody has to have a blog is about as helpful and effective as burying your head in the sand regarding technology. Neither extreme is good and libraries suffer as a result…
>
> I think sometimes we would be better off if we just stripped the term 2.0 off of technology. We evaluate and plan other technologies, services, and upgrades in

> our libraries. Sometimes we plan them to death (but that is another topic). But when you throw in the term 2.0 it seems that sometimes we forget ourselves and jump to extremes. We either run out and adopt it automatically without question, or we bury our heads in the sand thinking "not another 2.0 thing."
>
> Forget buzzwords and 2.0 terms. We need to know about the tools but we also need to remember to let the need choose the tool, not the tool choose the need.

No additional comment required.

Closing Notes

In a January 8, 2008 post at *davidrothman.net*, David Rothman says this about Library 2.0, or more specifically "Library 2.0":

> I think that I have come to agree with T. Scott. The work is important and good, but the term is not. I urge librarians, particularly bibliobloggers, to use the term carefully (if at all). We don't need it to describe the application of Web trends and technologies to library work, we REALLY don't need it in order to describe making libraries more patron-centric, and when we use it (usually failing to explain/define it) we add to the confusion and needlessly alienate potential ALLIES for improving computer literacy in libraryfolk and in patrons.
>
> I like Wikis and blogs and RSS and APIs and mashups and portable data and rich user experiences and social networking tools and online productivity tools and social bookmarking. I'm fascinated by the new and interesting things people keep doing with the Web. I believe that librarians need to be technologists and need to know what "Web 2.0" means--but that doesn't mean they need to add to the existing confusion. It means they need to help smooth it away.
>
> Jargon is fine in small groups of specialists--but information professionals, I think, have a special responsibility to help others overcome and dismiss jargon when it gets in the way of sharing information. Not only to bring the benefits of these new technologies to all our colleagues, but to all our patrons.

"Add to the confusion and needlessly alienate potential *allies*…" sum it up pretty well. One fundamental bit of confusion is that "Library 2.0" masked a *real* dichotomy between two groups of library people: Those who really, truly believe that libraries are *doomed* without rapid and **transformational** change—and those who believe that libraries will succeed by evolving from a strong base of success. I'm obviously within the latter group, even believing that too-rapid, too-transformational change within public libraries (at least) could, in fact, endanger them by alienating the strongest supporters and users. I believe the first group wanted Library 2.0 as a rallying cry—and I don't think that's what it's become. As it is, it continues to be a distraction.

Maybe it's a distraction that's on its way out. I certainly don't always agree with Rory Litwin, but an April 15, 2009 post at *Library juice* (libraryjuicepress.com/blog/), "Library 2.0 talk enters backwardation," includes a couple of paragraphs worth thinking about:

> There is a kind of library *talk* that you can read on blogs and hear at conference presentations that seems to have the quality of a commodity. Library 2.0 talk has a commodity-like quality to it, as does a lot of other talk about technological change in libraries. You see the title of the presentation and you pretty much know what to expect, and people attend the presentation with a desire for some of that refreshing, predictable stuff (predictable and refreshing are not mutually exclusive qualities--think of orange juice). Occasionally you will hear or read something that stands on its own and has to be considered separately from other stuff--the boutique speaker or writer. But most of what you get is commodity-grade talk--ideas that you're familiar with and have heard a dozen times.
>
> It seems to me that demand for a lot of this stuff, the Library 2.0 talk, is beginning to decline, at the same time that supply seems to have surged, with everybody and her cousin a supplier. People are getting a little tired of it, and it has become so abundant that it is everywhere. It tends to stay around for a while, too, in the web environment. It might even be accurate to say that there was a commodity bubble in Library 2.0 talk.

Has that bubble finally burst? Only time will tell.

Masthead

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