Cites & Insights

Crawford at Large

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Volume 7, Number 6: June 2007 ISSN 1534-0937 Walt Crawford

Bibs & Blather

On Being Wrong

Have you ever been wrong?

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

Admitting error

Here's a tougher question:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Inside This Issue

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

Failure to admit error: Egotism or cowardice?

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

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

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

Speaking of being wrong

Recently, I realized that I was fundamentally wrong in one of the more controversial posts at *Walt at random*—but maybe not the way that some of you thought I was wrong. The post: "Movers, shakers, self-promotion and C&I," posted April 13, 2006.

Of course I was wrong to cite people named "Movers & Shakers" by *Library Journal* as shameless self-promoters—and I made that admission as part of the 29-comment thread: "First, **I was wrong** to couple "self-promoting" with LJ's Movers & Shakers. Period."

I *won't* admit to error in distinguishing between self-promotion and blogging, publishing (even self-publishing), writing, speaking: There's a huge difference between putting out your thoughts and making sure that people Look At You!

Here's where I *was* wrong—and haven't realized it until recently: I regarded "shameless self-promotion" as a bad thing. **I was wrong**. At the very least I was too simplistic, but I think "wrong" says it best.

I know why I was wrong. Despite my blog and ejournal, I'm terrible at self-promotion—I'm an introvert, and it shows in areas like this. I agreed to use "The Crawford Files" for my *American Libraries* column reluctantly after we'd exhausted other possibilities. Similarly "Crawford's Corner" in *Library Hi Tech News:* the original title, "Trailing Edge Notes," no longer made sense and a lovely (I thought) title I came up with was too long and soundly derided by those I suggested it to. None of my books has had a title like "Crawford's Guide to…" (I would say "or ever will," but "ever" is a long time.) Take a look at the banner of this issue to see the relative prominence of my name as compared to the primary title and the slogan.

The virtues of self-promotion

Just because I'm lousy at self-promotion doesn't make it a bad thing. Promoting yourself can help others have a clearer image of who you are, just as promoting your library—telling your library's story, marketing your library, whatever—helps others understand the library.

Is there a line between self-promotion and shameless self-promotion? Maybe, but I'm not one to draw it. Is there a line between self-promotion and *excessive* self-promotion? I think so. I think it's the point where your message is lost in self-congratulation.

But I also think divining that line is like identifying obscenity: You may know it when you see it, and so may I, but we may see it at different places and it's damnably difficult to define precisely.

Effective self-promotion means you get full credit for who you are and what you've accomplished. I suppose it means getting the best jobs and perks. Maybe it should: Self-promotion is hard work.

Particularly for introverts who were brought up to promote their product, not themselves. There are times I regret not being better at self-promotion, not being more of an extrovert. Mostly, though, I have to be comfortable in my own skin.

Or am I wrong about that as well?

Balanced Libraries

Do you find *Cites & Insights* valuable? I assume the answer is "Yes." I also assume some of you have found my work on Library 2.0, FINDING A BALANCE and the new MAKING IT WORK section valuable.

If you find this valuable, you should buy *Balanced Libraries: Thoughts on Continuity and Change* (lulu.com/waltcrawford/). I've seen two **wonderful** reviews, one from Pete Smith at *library too*, another from Jennifer Macaulay at *Life as I know it*.

Pete says (among other things):

> [O]ne of the most refreshing aspects of the book [is] that it offers ideas, reflections and examples but always reminds us to put these in the context of our libraries and our visitors. The book is thus a good example of a balanced approach; it is not a strident call to revolution, nor a paean to lost joys. Rather it is a reasoned call to maintain the best of what we have and to always look as to how we can make change work for our libraries…
>
> I recommend this book to anyone interested in 'Library 2.0' and other contemporary issues, as Crawford sets them in their wider context. Yet it covers broader issues than just the latest technology, and does so in a considered way. As such, it will also stand when today's issues are yesterday's debates. It is passionate, yet not partisan; timely, yet not time bound.

Jennifer says (among other things):

> I would recommend this book to any of my colleagues. Whether one likes the term or not, the concept of Library 2.0 is important as are the discussions that have taken place around it. Reading *Balanced Libraries* is a great way to learn more about Library 2.0—in a very non-threatening way that won't cause people to become overwhelmed by the winds of change that seem to always be surrounding us….
>
> I definitely think it would be great for all library students to read also. There is some great information about how to balance change and continuity in libraries—which to me, is a critical message.

What can I say? Buy the book.

Making it Work

People Use Library Resources

Steve Lawson riffs on a Ryan Deschamps post on the benefits of a library for children in "Look it up, kid," posted January 27, 2007 at *See also…* (stevelawson.name/seealso/) Deschamps' son wanted to know more about the Hoover Dam, and instead of going directly to the internet Deschamps suggested looking it up at the library. Lawson recounts a similar conversation with his five-year-old son Luke, who wanted to know more about sea anemones and what they eat.

> My first impulse was to reach for Wikipedia, but then I remembered that Luke and I had talked about dead-tree encyclopedias recently, so I told him that this would be a perfect thing to look up in an encyclopedia.
>
> I had intended to look it up with him in an encyclopedia at our public library, but then Shanon brought him by my library one afternoon, and we took a walk through the reference section.

Lawson makes this a narrative of discovery. *World Book* "was disappointing"—it might have answered the question but had no photo. *Britannica* wasn't much better. So they went off to the Q's "and did much better with our search there (incidentally, sea anemones eat zooplankton and algae)."

Then Luke—not yet a reader—got excited and started looking for other encyclopedic work, wondering whether the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* might have anemones, for example. Lawson quotes Deschamps (kudos to Ryan for this sentence):

> At this library visit, his learning was not restricted to a specific "information need" but developed into an information haven, where all the neurons in his head would snap, crackle and pop as he went from resource to resource.

I'm on Lawson's side when he grumps about the phrase "information need" and it's worth noting that a good library does make "you feel a bit more alive, a bit more connected to people and ideas across time, a bit more aware of how much there is to know." And, as Lawson notes, there's *nothing to buy* at the library.

Deschamps' post "The crux of the biscuit: Do I believe in libraries?" appeared January 15, 2007 at *The other librarian* (otherlibrarian.wordpress.com). It's a longer narrative, starting with an admirable scene of Deschamps reading to his son "like I always do before he goes to bed." (Early and lifelong reader, here we come.) When his son asked about the Hoover Dam, he responded "I think you will have to go to the library to learn more"—and that started him thinking about the relevance of libraries in the "Web 2.0 technology world." Admitting that looking it up on the internet would be more "efficient," he believes his son will have an advantage because he says "go to the library"—and offers some reasons for this: The learning environment, an other mind, serendipity, the "digi-print combo," creating a learning routine and the motivational factor. Deschamps expands on each of those six, thoughtfully and eloquently. A selection from each of the six expansions:

> Learning is neither playing nor work. It should not be seen as frivolous nor should it be something that should be rushed. Learning is a serious yet fun activity that helps a human being develop. A library is designed to emphasize the fun-yet- serious aspect of learning.
>
> In my view, there is an intrinsic value to asking someone else to help you with a search. If nothing else, the other person could end up using different search terms than those you might try yourself.
>
> Dewey still does a great job of sexing up a search. Even though Amazon and Library Thing have book covers to attract people's attention online, they do not have the diversity of shapes, colors, sizes and contrasts that the physical library has.
>
> There is nothing like using a computer with a good print resource on your lap. The library encourages this sort of multitasking better than the average home office.
>
> Get hooked on the three-week circulation cycle, and you have a darn good habit for yourself and all your family.
>
> The library can have a lot of motivational benefits. Love can be one. Coffee is another. A productive day on the laptop might be yet another. If the library is doing what it is supposed to be doing, you ought to want to come back time and time again. This means you are learning and liking it.

Deschamps concludes:

> So, do I believe in libraries, even in an age where the Internet is faster and references questions are becoming scarce? You betcha big time. As a citizen, I would fight to the death before letting a flippant "it's all on the Internet" editorial destroy the reputation of the public library. It's not all on the Internet. Anyone who says it is needs to get out [to the library] more.

It's hard to comment on these two posts other than applaud and point to good parents at work. Oh, and to say, "**Go read these and think about them**."

Later we get three related posts about books in *academic* libraries—a concept some academic librarians seem to find old-fashioned, particularly since, you know, kids these days don't read.

Marc Meola puts it concisely in a March 10, 2007 post at *ACRlog* (acrlblog.org), "Are academic libraries ready for kids who read", referring to previously-discussed stories demonstrating that kids are, indeed, reading books—and in record numbers. Those kids will soon be entering college…

> Uh oh. Now that we've dumped all our books and installed wireless everywhere, it turns out that kids read! Call them the generation born with Harry Potter in their head. Is your library ready and do your librarians have the skills to deal with them?

Barbara Fister comments, "Academic libraries need to celebrate the fact people really like books." Pamela Snelson offers "Libraries at the cutting edge" in the March 29, 2007 *Inside higher ed* (insidehighered.com), noting the "trendiest meeting place on many college campuses" with its coffee bar, wireless internet, etc., etc… "And free access to books. Lots of books."

Snelson notes, "Circulation and visits at college and research libraries are on the rise." She discusses library web strategies but also the importance of the *physical* collection, not all available online. While 90% of college students now "visit the online library from home," physical library visits grew from 880 million in 2002 to more than a billion in 2004—and circulation was up 6% over that period, to more than 200 million items. "In short, if the classroom is the first stop in the learning experience, the library is the next, and great libraries continue to be a key to a great education."

Laura Cohen posted "Academic libraries and books: A good thing" at *Library 2.0: An academic's perspective* (liblogs.albany.edu/library20/) on March 29, 2007. She notes an *American Libraries* article that recommended splitting book-related services ("libraries") from everything else and giving "everything else" a different name to avoid the "baggage" of books. Cohen says:

> It's foolish to divide up the world of information into media types, with some formats seen as burdens to the advancement of modern academic libraries. In a world with so many options for interacting with texts, this just doesn't make much sense.

There's more here about how libraries and librarians can add value to resources—and Cohen takes issue with a David Lankes statement, "[Librarians] need to market how they add value, not their great collection of stuff." As Cohen says, "Actually, I think we should do both." Indeed. Later, after discussing tailored blogs as a way of adding value, she notes:

> Obviously, blogs aren't the only ways in which libraries can add value to the educational experience of reading books. I'm just using this as an example to support my point that libraries and books can co-exist just fine in the 2.0 world. In fact, Library 2.0 can make this co-existence better. Let's emphasize our association with books by offering students the means to comment on them, raise questions about them, analyze them, recommend them, associate them with similar books, write essays about them, and so on, all on the social, interactive, participatory Web. In other words, we've got work to do.

Adding value and going beyond books: **Great**. Downplaying books as a fundamental part of academic libraries: **Not so great**.

Heather Newman wrote "Books aren't the hook" in the April 15, 2007 Detroit *Free Press*. It's about gaming in libraries and how much it draws in teens and others—but the lede's a little misleading. "Once a month, more than 100 teens pour into the Rochester Hills Public Library—but they don't come for the books. They come for the games." Read that and the next few paragraphs and you might think games are pandering—they increase door count but do nothing to turn kids into readers. (Is Dance Dance Revolution educational on its own merits? That's another discussion.) Then, in the ninth paragraph, there's a key note: "The number of books checked out, especially in the teen area, goes way up on video game days."

They come for the games—and some of them stay for the books. To read. That's repeated a little later: Video game events are popular with youth "and kept kids coming back to the library—and checking out books."

Finally, an item from a movement I find myself joining, *Slow Library* (loomware.typepad.com/slowlibrary/), this time Jessamyn West posting "Taking the local" on April 6, 2007. West makes the same connection between Slow Library and Slow Food that I do and considers the question: "Once you get to the point where most library patrons in most places have at least nominal access to the same materials, what makes your library, the one in your town, yours?"

She suggests that web software can offer even very small libraries ways to answer that question, making useful things to bring back to their communities. "A library with a $23,000 budget can use them to help them do their jobs, their existing jobs and maybe some new ones, better."

> Once we get to the point where internet access isn't so shiny and everyone gets the idea that we're all part of this giant global community, they're still going to want a place to read a magazine, or play RuneScape, or download an audiobook, or find an old picture of their house, or just talk to someone about the weather. The more we can use the Web to go out and get things, the more it's important that we have a place to bring them back TO.

Thinking about Innovation

Jennifer Macaulay posted this question on *Life as I know it* (scruffynerf.wordpress.com) on February 9, 2007: "Innovative thinking—Why is it so hard?"

> Without a doubt, there are some really innovative people in the library world who are doing some amazing things. But are these people the norm or are they the exception? How many of us do innovative things or have innovative ideas on a daily basis (or a weekly one)?

Macaulay perceives innovation as difficult, particularly within a "culture that doesn't foster innovation." She points to others who have suggested that lack of sustained feedback is a barrier to innovation and thinks that rings true—particularly because innovative projects are just that: Projects.

> Life returns to normal after they have been completed. They have a beginning and an end. We don't have a continually evolving innovative attitude. And, we don't necessarily have good mechanisms to encourage spontaneous feedback. People don't generally come up and say "I have a great idea." More often than not, they only voice an opinion when asked about something.

Macaulay quotes Stephen Abram asking tough questions: Does management require every idea to be fully formed? Do new ideas get crushed under negative feedback? She wonders, "How we get staff to be excited about the library…to think creatively?"

For most people in most libraries, innovation may *not* happen on a daily basis: There's a lot of work that just needs to be done. But her points are well taken. Macaulay believes "innovation has to be a team effort—something that everyone buys into."

The comments are interesting. Jason (the *Pragmatic librarian*) talks about bringing "experienced staff" on board—maybe by executive fiat.

> I am certainly not advocating that administrators tell experienced staff to use every new technology available or get fired. Rather, administrators should encourage the kind of "reciprocal mentoring" that Abram advocates, where technology-savvy staff can get their less tech-savvy counterparts to think about libraries in broader terms related to the contemporary world. Perhaps such staff could be designated to keep up with innovations, and hold seminars every so often for all library staff to attend. It may seem "passive," but it's better than telling staff that they're on their own to keep up. Of course, if innovative thinking seeps its way into a library's culture, such a program would probably become unnecessary over time.

He's right in saying "the designated staff would need to have a light touch." Telling people they should retire or get out of the way—or, as Jason says, "innovate or die"—*will* alienate them. He offers sound suggestions: reverse mentors should use "experienced" staff interests as entry points and show how innovations "fit in with the perennial roles fulfilled by libraries." In other words, show the continuity in change. Jason offers caveats:

> I am not talking about using the technologies available today "because they're there." In fact, getting stuck on specific technologies seems just as regressive as not adapting them at all… I believe that we should primarily think about the "timeless" aspects of libraries (an arguably vague concept), and figure out ways that we can improve on them with new and emerging technologies.

Macaulay responds with a particularly good insight:

> One thing that I do think can help is to remove the technology aspect from this discussion. Innovative ideas do not necessarily have to rely upon technology…. One of my thoughts is that in a truly innovative culture, everyone feels comfortable expressing new ideas or thoughts about how to improve services. My overall impression is that so many people tend to be scared of or wary of technology because they don't understand it, because it intimidates them or because it frustrates them. I find that technology often limits what we are able to do mostly because it isn't well understood by the majority. In an innovative culture, ideas should flow freely.

Somehow this discussion relates directly to Ryan Deschamps' notion that we're at a point where "any idea to implement a technology ought to begin with a 'yes'." If you read the whole discussion (not included here), Deschamps does *not* mean all new suggestions should be implemented. He means the starting point should be openness to new ideas, then looking for a plan and seeing how they fit rather than "starting from no." Macaulay posted "Just say yes to technology?" on April 11, 2007—and she's "not convinced that just saying yes to ideas that involve technology is going to help resolve organizational issues." Macaulay believes cultural change needs to be deeper than this—and that *fit* always needs to be part of the discussion: "The technology needs to fit the situation, the library and the people."

> Ultimately, it seems that people are trying to figure out why the answer to proposals dealing with even simplistic technologies is more often than not No. This is a tough question…The library needs to have an organizational culture that accepts and even embraces change—one that encourages testing and trial by error. It is easier to say yes to ideas in a testing environment and it may be less threatening to those who don't take well to change.

Deschamps' post also set off an interesting, sometimes heated discussion—and I may deal with that as part of a cluster about librarians' willingness to disagree with one another. But not in this installment!

The same day as Macaulay's post, Steven Bell posted "Real library innovation or just new toasters" at *ACRlog*, Bell wonders whether academic libraries are innovative at all. "Yes, we harness a number of relatively new technologies to deliver a new service, but does that qualify as innovation? Perhaps we are confusing something new with something innovative." He's relating back to an earlier survey on technology innovation in academic libraries and wondering whether some of these "innovations" are "the equivalent of giving your user community purple ketchup?" (pointing to a *BusinessWeek* article by Dan Saffer on pseudo-innovation, an article that asks whether we're just "innovating for innovation's sake in order to roll out something that is new and improved").

How would you answer this question for the new things you've done in your library or that you want to do? "Do these sound like innovations—derived from the unmet needs and desires of users—or simply the result of libraries that felt they needed to roll out something new and improved?" It's a tough question, but I think Bell's example (institutional repositories) is in a third category: Something *the institution and its community* need and that the library *recognizes* that they need. The community, in this case, is scholarship. The fact that individual scholars don't seem to appreciate the need for institutional repositories doesn't negate that need. Most faculty members probably don't worry much about preservation in general; that's one reason you have professional librarians. Still, Bell's conclusion bears thinking about:

> I'm not knocking these libraries that have introduced some extraordinary new services to their user communities. I can't argue with the value of being able to offer continuous new improvements. But let's think more carefully about innovation and what it really means to produce something truly innovative. As Saffer says, "Rather than simply making novel products and services, we should strive to make better, more meaningful ones. Now that would be a true innovation."

Since this section began with a post based on a Ryan Deschamps post at *The other librarian* (otherlibrarian.wordpress.com), let's end it with a different Deschamps post—"Measuring staff time—is it costing us in innovation?" (February 14, 2007)

Deschamps notes cases where there's a choice between building "a piece of technology" in-house and outsourcing it—presumably the kind of thing that you *can* build in house, like a website or mashup (with the right people).

> You ask a tech-savy staff person how long the project would take him/her to develop. Two weeks? That's over a thousand dollars if you count the person's salary! We can outsource for [marginally] cheaper than that.
>
> This, in a word, is a poor way to manage staff resources.

Why? Because that may not be the *relevant* cost. The staff member's already on board; the relevant cost is "lost opportunity"—the value of the staff member's time if they're doing something else. But there's another issue as well, which Deschamps points out in the third item below:

> If you'd be taking that staff person away from a really valuable project, then I'd say you are justified in outsourcing. If that staff is just twiddling his or her thumbs then you are losing lots. Consider:
>
> 1. The loss of dollars spent on the outsourced product.
>
> 2. The lost productivity caused by putting your developer to less valuable or "make work" projects.
>
> 3. The lost knowledge and skills that could result from your staff doing the project.

He mentions usability and maintainability as possible reasons to prefer outsourcing, but those cut both ways: You may have much better control over the usability of something developed in house. He discusses a number of related issues that suggest thinking more about the virtues of inhouse development, at least in some cases. Consider your website: Is it really *your* website or is it a few possibly clumsy facades erected over a canned product:

> Libraries using CMSs with designs that don't hide the product. Joomla sites will look like Joomla. Drupal sites will look like Drupal. And because we don't know how to code a little bit of php, we put up with it — even when we know that the site will get really tired fast.

The first comment from David Delong mentions "lost knowledge": the extent to which outsourcing gives away institutional knowledge and leaves the institution more dependent on the supplier.

I don't have lots of commentary on these items, other than to say this is interesting and important stuff. You can't do everything in house, but how much do you lose when you rely on outside sources? How do you foster a culture where new ideas are encouraged without going overboard? How do you find balance—between feasibility and controlling your own destiny, between continuity and change?

The Future Lies Ahead

Lynn Scott Cochrane (Denison University) starts off with "If the academic library ceased to exist, would we have to invent it" from the January/February 2007 *EDUCAUSE Review* (www.educause.edu/apps/er/). She notes the conventional wisdom among college students and some parents that "everything needed for research is available free on the web" and the resulting view that academic libraries are "costly dinosaurs—unnecessary expenses in today's environment." Then she imagines August 2010 at Excellent College (EC), a liberal arts college with 2,000 undergrads and 200 faculty. EC decided to stop funding its library.

> Instead, it will give students a tuition rebate and give faculty a stipend representing their share of the annual amount that would previously have gone to support the library's collections, facilities, and staff—about $2.7 million total. Each student and faculty member will get $1,230. For now, the library building and hard-copy collections will remain in place, student assistants will keep the doors open, and custodians will clean the facility; but database subscriptions will be discontinued, and no other services will be provided. Since the college has a robust honor code, circulation of materials will be on the honor system. Students and faculty will now be on their own to secure the information resources they need to fulfill their responsibilities.

Cochrane offers seven predictions, expanding on each. I'm rewording here:

- Students and faculty will buy the necessities first—students using $600 or more of the rebate for textbooks, faculty a comparable amount for their key journals. That leaves $630 for everything else.
- They'll go to Google—and not do as well for a variety of reasons, including the limitations in Google Scholar.
- Then they'll go to the public library—which in most cases will have "few, if any, scholarly journals, databases, or monographs."
- Then they'll go to Huge State University (HSU)—but HSU made the same decision as EC, so there are no databases and the books are all being used by HSU users.
- So they'll subscribe to databases—but some of those are only available at institutional levels, and other general ones cost $500 to $700 per year *for one individual's use*. There's the allotment. Want a subject-specific database? You'll have to pay for it out of pocket.
- Students and faculty will figure out how to generate lists of who subscribes to what so that they can illegally share IDs and passwords—and maybe they'll put together a database of who has which books. Sort of like a circulation system, but maintained voluntarily—which means it won't be maintained during key parts of the academic year.
- EC's president will need information on an alumna and potential donor, access to old board minutes and other stuff—but the college archives disappeared along with the librarians.

In other words, EC desperately needs to establish a library. With librarians. And pooled resources. Cochrane gives a *current* illustration: A faculty member (elsewhere) who downloaded an article through library databases—and who had inquired about getting a copy of the volume from which the article came. The volume cost $1,200.

> Let's assume that libraries had and will continue to have two basic roles: (1) to purchase published materials in all formats and make them easily available to users; and (2) to identify, preserve, and manage unique special collections and locally produced information resources and make them easily available to users. Let's further assume, based on the recommendation of several experts in library administration, that libraries should move to a fifty-fifty split of expenditure and time between these two roles. In other words, academic libraries should be spending approximately half their time and money on capturing, preserving, and distributing locally produced materials, such as scholarly monographs, essays and articles, research and project reports, artworks, photographs, analyses of fieldwork, documentation of campus events, alumni-produced intellectual property, correspondence, campus records, and minutes of the campus board of trustees. These materials are not and never will be available in the marketplace from vendors; they are the products of local efforts…

> Over the next decade (probably less), library leaders need to help those of us in academic libraries to reduce our focus on the publisher-driven model (role 1) and increase our attention and resources to the user-driven model (role 2). Then we can do what we've always done best: bring order out of the information chaos swirling around us. We will acquire, preserve, and direct users to quality published resources appropriate for academic purposes; but more important, we will acquire, preserve, and direct users to unique local materials not available elsewhere.

If you hear echoes of Slow Library—local and mindful—you're not alone. If you hear a strong suggestion that the traditional roles (and collections) of academic libraries continue to be important, and that building the *local* history may become even more important: So do I. I don't believe that's limited to academic libraries. I believe the best public libraries will increasingly be places that build community knowledge.

ACRL's top ten assumptions

ACRL announced "top ten assumptions" for the future of academic libraries—developed by the ACRL Research Committee based on a survey of "member leaders" and a literature review. Here's the list:

> 1. There will be an increased emphasis on digitizing collections, preserving digital archives, and improving methods of data storage and retrieval.
>
> 2. The skill set for librarians will continue to evolve in response to the needs and expectations of the changing populations (student and faculty) that they serve.
>
> 3. Students and faculty will increasingly demand faster and greater access to services.
>
> 4. Debates about intellectual property will become increasingly common in higher education.
>
> 5. The demand for technology related services will grow and require additional funding.
>
> 6. Higher education will increasingly view the institution as a business.
>
> 7. Students will increasingly view themselves as customers and consumers, expecting high quality facilities and services.
>
> 8. Distance learning will be an increasingly common option in higher education and will co-exist but not threaten the traditional bricks-and-mortar model.
>
> 9. Free, public access to information stemming from publicly funded research will continue to grow.
>
> 10. Privacy will continue to be an important issue in librarianship.

I think assumptions #1-3 are safe, if perhaps obvious; #s 6 and 7 are probable and unfortunate (I hate to see students view themselves as "customers and consumers": it seems demeaning. And it's sad when colleges and universities are regarded as businesses); #9 is certain—but "grow" can mean anything from a modest level of growth that does little to threaten the big-publisher hegemony to serious OA alternatives. I *trust* #10 is true (but sometimes wonder), I *hope* #8 is true (that distance learning doesn't threaten onsite education—noting that education and learning are related but not identical), and I don't know enough to comment on #s 4 and 5 at all—except to say I'd like to see *informed* discussion on the range of IP issues as they affect the future of scholarship and creativity.

An expanded document on these assumptions is available at www.acrl.org/ala/acrl/acrlpubs/crlnews/backissues2007/april07/tenassumptions.htm. I find it interesting that the expansion of #5 seems to assume a "tipping point" after which print becomes an "out-of-favor technology," which I'd argue is untrue for books but echoes claims of academic librarians determined to get rid of print collections. On #7, the expansion says, "Today's students are increasingly paying the true cost of their education and demanding to be treated as customers"—which is not true for many public institutions and a tricky generalization. (Do students really yearn to be treated as customers? Sigh.)

John D. Berry *is* an academic librarian. He commented at *Vitae libros* (vitaelibros.blogsource.com) on April 6, 2007. Berry isn't thrilled, noting "Some of it is just protectionism and some of it appears to be a total failure of vision." A few of his thoughts (not all—**go read the post**!):

- On #2 and its "in response" attitude: "Last I heard we are a profession. One of our professional obligations is for us to define what we do, not be market driven."
- On #3: "Yes, this is so and directly contradicts item #8 below. We can't do this 24/7 with bricks and mortar. Which means bricks and mortar will become increasingly irrelevant."
- On #4 and #10—well, those two you're just going to have to **read in the original**.
- On #6: "Only if the members of the profession and the academy let it head in this direction. We didn't become world leaders in education and innovation by educating as 'a business.'"
- On #7, noting that Berry is at the University of California, Berkeley: "From here Students had better just remain students inside the hollowed halls. Public education is still cheaper

than Private. The day when that is no longer true—then they can act that way."

- On #8: "Distance learning will evolve in capability, capacity (bandwidth) and content and increasing replace bricks and mortar. Why remain vested in place, when you can have a World venue for far less investment." I have a problem with that; I believe going *to* a campus to learn still has its virtues, at least for undergraduate education.
- On #9: "Most unlikely, the trend if anything is going in the other direction. They all must think Google and company are doing the digital work they are doing for altruistic purposes?" Here I think, Berry misreads what's being said. I interpreted #9 as being about open access to government-funded research. The trend is in that direction. I'm not sure what Google has to do with this. Their digitization certainly doesn't make information *less* publicly available, or at least I can't arrive at such an interpretation. (Yes, Google Book Search errs badly in treating post-1923 government publications as though they were copyright—although outside the U.S. some of them may be. That's a different issue.)

Berry concludes: "Sigh, I think I will go back and re-read William Gibson, his vision of the possible futures is more interesting and thought provoking than this middle of the road pseudo-professional babbling..."

Marc Meola commented on the list in an April 26, 2007 post at *ACRLog*. In part:

> The two that have generated the most discussion on the [lists] have been 6 and 7, which deal with applying a business model to higher education and viewing students as customers or consumers. As this makes many academic librarians retch, I think the committee needs to spell out more exactly what this means, why they think it will come to pass, and why they seem to think we are powerless to do anything about it.
>
> In general I think we need to be both more humble about our attitude toward the future (face it, we have no idea what's going to happen) and be more rigorous when we do think about the future. Assumptions or predictions can sometimes seem as if they are being offered by those whose true aim is to turn assumptions in to self-fulfilling prophecy (look at #5 for example). Or perhaps there is no hidden agenda but assumptions turn into self-fulfilling prophecy anyway (this is the way things are going so we better go along with it.) I'd like to see more clarity and transparency about who thinks what may be happening and to clearly distinguish that from what it is that we want to have happen. When thinking about the future, let's not give in to determinism or give up our agency.

Self-fulfilling prophecies will always be with us; Meola raises good points. In comments, Steven Bell calls the list "a bit of a letdown" and views the assumptions as describing the *current* state of higher education.

The future of the reference desk

This issue keeps popping up as a debatable issue—even if this is *particularly* a case where "the" is the wrong word to use, given how different libraries, their communities and their physical layouts can be. For some libraries, the reference desk as such may be on the decline and that may be a good thing. For some libraries, the reference desk may continue to be enormously useful *as a place*. And for many, *probably most*, a variety of reference methodologies—roaming reference, IM/virtual reference and at-the-desk reference—will continue to make sense.

Steven Bell and Sarah Watstein offered "Debating the future of the reference desk" at *ACRLog* on March 27, 2007. The post cites points made by them in a debate at Columbia University—Bell arguing that "we should eliminate the desk by 2012," Watstein arguing against. Portions of Bell's key points:

> Several libraries have already done away with the traditional desk or are no longer putting subject specialists at desks.
>
> Advanced technology like the Vocera device can allow librarians to be connected with users at any point in the building…
>
> We're not getting real reference questions anymore; we are getting lots of printer and computer questions (you call that reference?); we are getting more questions that require time consuming consultations and those should be managed at locations other than reference desks
>
> The reference desk is just a symbol for reference service; getting rid of the desk does not mean getting rid of the service
>
> Leveraging new technologies to eliminate reference desks will not eliminate the human touch; it will only mean it migrates to other service points…

Portions of Watstein's opposing points:

> The reference desk is a powerful symbol and essential to the mission and purpose of academic reference service, but also to the culture of our academic libraries in general; an academic library without a reference desk is unthinkable
>
> In our increasingly impersonal world, the value of personal service has never been higher….

> Transactions may be down but academic library reference desks are still incredibly busy; our reference desks are symbols of our service in action.
>
> Search and discovery in our complex information environs is not getting any easier… Today more than ever users need an intermediary; reference librarians can perform more efficient, more precise and more knowledgeable searches
>
> A teachable moment in person is not equal to a teachable moment online…
>
> …Today's desks are designed to serve not just a purpose, but also our audience. They are more durable, have greater aesthetic appeal, are more customizable, and truly complement the versatile learning environments that increasingly define our academic libraries.

[A sidenote: Reporting on this session does *not* violate my new general rule of not commenting on conference reports—because these notes come *directly* from the speakers and must be assumed to correctly reflect what they intended to say.]

The closing paragraph is interesting, and reminds me why I don't do debates when they say "a good debate should really polarize the issues…" I read their reasons for such polarization, but I consistently find debates to be less informative than less polarized discussions. In fact, "We don't think desks will become extinct over the next five years, but we do believe the profession will be experimenting with multiple reference models some of which will not require a traditional desk. Methods and modes of providing reference service will continue to change—and must, if we are to stay relevant to our users."

Which is fine, but that means *there is no debate*. It's a classic "and not or" situation—and many if not most libraries, at least larger ones, are already not only "experimenting with" but *using* multiple reference models, some of which do not require the desk.

Anne of *Bad girl librarian* (badgirllibrarian.blogspot.com) argues strongly for the continued usefulness of reference desks in "Reference desk o reference desk" (April 17, 2007). She reads articles about whether or not we want to keep the reference desk and wonders whether those articles "make anyone else crazy?"

> Yes, reference is changing. Yes, students are tech savvy and like to communicate primarily through txt messaging and MySpace or Facebook. Yes, "where's the bathroom" and the art of unjamming staplers and printers is not why I went to library school. But there's something to be said for being *out* there.
>
> I want to see how the patrons are using our space and our resources. I want to be there for when they get stuck. I want to see the questions people ask about my disciplines and collections. Being out there is how I learn what to teach and buy for the collection.
>
> I'm happy to answer questions through IM—I love Meebo and tell everyone they should use it. I think del.icio.us is great for storing collection-relevant links… I think email and chat reference are easier than in-person reference because I can send users the links and they're right there. I've done mobile reference with a laptop and no print collection—no sweat. But for all of those situations, the users have to know where I am.
>
> The library building is symbolic. Most students prefer the online resources, and if they get stuck and can figure out who to ask for help and how to get ahold of them without getting up, they will. But sometimes they just don't know who to ask. And that's when they come to the reference desk. Take it away, they won't ask at all.

There's more—and Anne notes that she's coming from a social science/humanities background where there are few perfect keywords and results may require sifting through many resources. She concludes that reference will keep evolving—but that spending part of her time "doing the same things I do at my desk" out where people can find her continues to be valuable.

Thus spoke pragmatic librarian (pragmaticlibrarian.wordpress.com) posts a discussion of these issues on April 17, 2007. It's **best read in the original**, and comes from a place with a combined circulation and reference desk. His concluding paragraph comes back to a pragmatic middle that's different for every library:

> In the end, however, I think we all just need to be honest with ourselves. Especially with relatively few staff, a library with a busy reference desk can't just get rid of it because of some "visionary" proclamation. Similarly, a library with a slow reference desk can't hold on to one for the sake of tradition, especially if time and money can allow librarians to engage in more visionary work. Ultimately, it's up to individual libraries to decide whether "traditional" reference desk duties seem more useful for their communities, or (time and money permitting) if librarians should do more than clearing various mechanical jams and pointing patrons to the bathroom. Personally, I think we all should be willing and able to do either one, depending on the needs of the library where we happen to work at any given time. Some institutional honesty and a willingness to critically examine the nature of reference desk transactions seems like a good place to start.

It works differently in each situation; it's hard to argue with that final sentence.

Longer Items

That heading may make little sense; it's used to set off discussions of single items that appear to function differently than blog posts and the like. These are the things that originally appeared in THE LIBRARY STUFF.

My Job in 10 Years

John Dupuis, a science librarian at York University, thought carefully about where his job might be in 2015, resulting in a series of posts at *Confessions of a science librarian* (jdupuis.blogspot.com) beginning June 21, 2005 and ending December 12, 2006. The December 12 post includes a link to an aggregated PDF including all seven posts and running 11 single-spaced pages.

It's an impossible discussion to summarize but I'll offer a few notes (while encouraging you to **read the whole thing**, even if it is sans serif). Dupuis is looking at *his* environment—"reference, instruction, collections and scholarship in an academic science & engineering library." Just as the projections would be different for almost any public library, they would also be different for humanities and social science libraries.

In his introduction, Dupuis notes that just since 2000, eresources have gone from "nice-to-have to only-thing-that-matters" (in science libraries), and Google has gone "from a cute little niche search engine to the eight hundred pound gorilla." Still, lots of things are done the old way: "we still buy an awful lot of books, the vast majority of our reference interactions are face to face" and some journals—even science ones—are print only. "This is obviously still a period of transition."

The first topical essay in the group covers reference. He believes questions and how answers are delivered will change radically—partly because he's an optimist: "Online tools will become increasingly comprehensive and comprehensible." He expects "harder and more challenging" questions—but still questions. He expects face-to-face reference to "continue to be an important service" whether it's done at a desk, roaming, consulting in a study room or from remote locations. Reference interviews (I like his wording: "sitting down with someone and talking out their problem") will continue to play an important role. He believes that, come 2015, he'll still sit at a desk in a physical library and answer questions from patrons—but also offer more virtual communication. "Are there any changes I can't currently imagine? I hope so." In a followup, he mentions reference wikis and threaded discussion lists for reference interactions.

The first post on collections offers his prediction that he'll still be buying *some* print books in 2015, mostly in the history and philosophy of science, but with many "books" moving online or dual format. He makes useful distinctions between books designed to be read through (which are likely *still* to work best in print in 2015) and those with content that benefits from being "broken down, recombined and focused on specific needs"—where online resources and possibly custom print-on-demand packages make more sense. He anticipates buying almost no journals in print form (probably true for science)—and also expects to see "virtually all" journals abandon the issue model, becoming entirely article-based. He anticipates that blogs, wikis and other new media (he says "social software") will start to have an important impact on scholarly publishing—and the biggest challenge in a decade will be "marketing to students the resources we do purchase—convincing them that we have something to offer that beats what they can get for free." A followup concerns open access, which he regards as "a really tough area" for prognostication. He anticipates a variety of business models but thinks there may be a tipping point in 10 to 15 years toward a more open, instant publishing methodology. He expects even more aggregation.

When it comes to databases, Dupuis takes an interesting stance: He's fairly certain Google and its successors will "leav[e] no room for the traditional abstracting and indexing vendors" by 2015. He looks forward to canceling A&I databases once Google Scholar is "good enough for virtually all needs." He expects to spend that saved money on full text databases: "People already expect that everything worth reading is online—it seems to me a good marketing strategy is making it so." He wants to license "the full text version of Google Print when it's finished"—which makes *enormous* assumptions about copyright and the will of publishers to make that legal and feasible.

The final essay, 14 months after the penultimate one, is a long discussion offering further thoughts on abstracting and indexing. It's a tough discussion, one that relies somewhat on Dupuis' sense of "good enough" being, in fact, good enough for an academic library. He thinks automated and informal retrieval methods will be "good enough" to eliminate any need for proper subject indexing. He notes that users like using free resources and find that search engines "mostly return fairly relevant hits for most clearly defined topics"—and he thinks "good enough" is "not necessarily a bad thing" in most cases. He argues that librarians should be loyal to patrons, not to A&I or content publishers, and that the goal of serving his user community as best he can may—he believes *will*—mean minimizing expenditures on discovery tools to maximize expenditures on content and infrastructure.

Here's a sentence that gives me pause, but he may be right: "I think that in the next decade we will certainly start to see expenditures on A&I databases diminish as free alternatives get better and, more importantly, are perceived (by our users and, ultimately, by us too) as equivalent to the more expensive alternatives." It's the "more importantly" that bothers me—the idea that *perception* is more important than reality. "Gives me pause" does not mean I'm sure he's wrong; it means I'm uneasy—but I'm also not a science librarian.

Are librarians totally obsolete?

There's nothing wrong with a feel-good piece once in a while, particularly when it's well thought out, detailed—and not from within the library field. This article by Will Sherman falls into that category. It appeared January 30, 2007 at *DegreeTutor*, a site for online education (www.degreetutor.com/library/adult-continued-education/librarians-needed). Sherman has a BA in Language Studies from the University of California at Santa Cruz; he's definitely not a professional librarian.

The article starts with a link to Blake Carver's dystopian predictions at *LISNews* way back in October 2005. (That megapost is at features.lisnews.com/features/05/10/07/0921246.shtml?tid=18. I commented on it at even greater length in PERSPECTIVE: LIBRARY FUTURES, MEDIA FUTURES in *C&I* 5:13 (Mid-Fall 2005), available at citesandinsights.info/v5i13b.htm—but heck, since the only other essay in the issue is LIFE TRUMPS BLOGGING, you should download the whole thing at citesandinsights.info/civ5i13.pdf.)

The Sherman article is some 5,000 words—12 printed pages (or seven *C&I* pages). It's **worth reading** on its own and in full. The subtitle is "33 reasons why libraries and librarians are still extremely important." I'm mostly just providing the reasons themselves and the conclusion; the bulk of the text expands on the reasons. Sherman leaves out a whole set of place-related issues, but that's only to be expected. Consider this a detailed cite for a particularly interesting pro-library piece from a somewhat unusual source. **Go read it**.

1. Not everything is available on the internet
2. Digital libraries are not the internet
3. The internet isn't free
4. The internet complements libraries, but it doesn't replace them
5. School libraries and librarians improve student test scores
6. Digitization doesn't mean destruction
7. In fact, digitization means survival
8. Digitization is going to take a while. A long while.
9. Libraries aren't just books
10. Mobile devices aren't the end of books, or libraries
11. The hype might really just be hype
12. Library attendance isn't falling—it's just more virtual now
13. Like businesses, digital libraries still need human staffing
14. We just can't count on physical libraries disappearing
15. Google Book Search "don't work"
16. Physical libraries can adapt to cultural change
17. Physical libraries are adapting to cultural change
18. Eliminating libraries would cut short an important process of cultural evolution
19. The internet isn't DIY
20. Wisdom of crowds is untrustworthy, because of the tipping point
21. Librarians are the irreplaceable counterparts to web moderators
22. Unlike moderators, librarians must straddle the line between libraries and the internet
23. The internet is a mess
24. The internet is subject to manipulation
25. Libraries' collections employ a well-formulated system of citation
26. It can be hard to isolate concise information on the internet
27. Libraries can preserve the book experience
28. Libraries are stable while the web is transient
29. Libraries can be surprisingly helpful for news collections and archives
30. Not everyone has access to the internet
31. Not everyone can afford books
32. Libraries are a stopgap to anti-intellectualism
33. Old books are valuable

Conclusion

Society is not ready to abandon the library, and it probably won't ever be. Libraries can adapt to social and technological changes, but they can't be replaced. While libraries are distinct from the internet, librarians are the most suited professionals to guide scholars and citizens toward a better understanding of how to find valuable information online. Indeed, a lot of information is online. But a lot is still on paper. Instead of regarding libraries as obsolete, state and federal governments should increase funding for improved staffing and technology. Rather than lope blindly through the digital age, guided only by the corporate interests of web economics, society should foster a culture of guides and guideposts. Today, more than ever, libraries and librarians are extremely important for the preservation and improvement of our culture.

Trends & Quick Takes

Blogging for Bucks: The Dark Side

"Over the last six months, Ron DesGrosseilliers has recommended more than 260 products on his two blogs—everything from travel sites and TV shows to laminate floors and lingerie." And made decent money doing so: These are paid posts, sponsored by PayPerPost and (apparently) run without disclosure. *PC World* for February 2007 has an interesting one-page "consumer alert" by Dan Tynan discussing the growing trend of posting for pay.

As Tynan points out, it may not even matter if the paid posts are negative. Assuming the posts link to the product's website, they still raise its visibility in search engines. At least ReviewMe explicitly requires disclosure (and explicitly *doesn't* require positive posts but does require that they be at least 200 words long and include the sponsor's link).

More than 3,700 blogs have signed up with ReviewMe. The article doesn't say how many take bucks from PayPerPost, but does say new competitors are on the horizon. Maybe what surprises me is how *cheaply* people sell their names and integrity: $5 to $10 with PayPerPost.

We Can't All Be Winners

I don't think it's necessarily schadenfreude, but there's no doubt that it's sometimes more entertaining to read studies of washouts than endless lists of the Top 25 Whatever. Here's a couple of the former for your bemusement, if perhaps not edification.

David Louis Edelman posted "Ten tech companies that blew it in the past two decades" on January 26, 2007 on his blog (www.davidlouisedelman.com/blog/). These aren't necessarily companies that failed entirely—but ones that "strike me as prime examples of organizations who lost a commanding lead and/or market dominance in a particular field due to their own idiocy or incompetence."

Here's the list, each one of which has a paragraph of discussion in the post: Atari, Netscape, Palm, American Online, Apple, Sony, Gateway, Compaq, Intuit, and RealNetworks. You'd have to read his reasoning; he concludes that the main causes are "failure of nerve, failure to innovate, excessive greed, excessive litigiousness and overwhelming fear of Microsoft."

Hard to argue with Atari, Netscape as a corporation or AOL as failures. I don't know enough about Palm to comment and Apple's that odd situation of a company that failed and then sort-of succeeded (although its share of the PC market is still tiny). Sony? Hard to accuse them of failure—and Edelman completely ignores Sony's suicidal DRM moves. He claims that Intuit only succeeds with TurboTax and QuickBooks because "nobody's made a serious effort lately at unseating them"—which, at least for TurboTax, might surprise the people at TaxCut. (And Quicken *still* leads its market—a very odd definition of failure.)

Computerworld's David Haskins upped the ante for individual products and technologies with "Don't believe the hype: The 21 biggest technology flops," posted on April 4, 2007 (go to www.computerworld.com and search for "21 biggest technology flops"). The article presents them in alphabetical order within two sublists—the 14 "top flops" and 11 runners-up. Here's the list, again shorn of commentary:

Top flops: Apple Newton, Digital audio tape (DAT), DivX, "Dot-bombs" such as Pets.com, E-books, IBM PCjr, Internet currency (e.g. Flooz and Beenz), Iridium, Microsoft Bob, the Net PC, the paperless office, push technology, smart appliances and virtual reality.

Runners-up: Apple Lisa, Dreamcast, NeXT, OS/2, Qube (Warner's 1977 interactive cable-TV system), speech recognition and WebTV.

Those are hard lists to argue with. There are different reasons for the failures, and some assert that push technology is working and that some others are "just around the corner." I'm not one of them.

Computerworld invited reader votes as to the biggest flop of them all. The biggest winners—er, losers?

1st place: Microsoft Bob. 2nd place: Dot-bombs, 3,870 votes (12%). 3rd place: The paperless office, 2,828 votes (9%). 4th place: DIVX, 2,704 votes (8%). 5th place: Iridium, 2,615 votes (8%)

The article summing up the votes is more interesting for other elements. There's a list of reader nominees which I won't quote and more extended discussion. They quote some of the debate over whether Y2K was a flop—including those who say (I believe correctly, at least in part) that the main reason Y2K was a non-event is because thousands of programmers busted their butts to make fixes during 1999. And of course—*of course*—people lambasted them for including ebooks and some other products. The saddest comments were from people who took the whole thing a little too seriously: Any article like this has to be at least partly humorous or it's a waste of electrons.

Just for fun, here's one from the editor emeritus of *Gizmodo* (gizmodo.com), that ultimate shiny-new-toy site (motto: "Gizmodo, the gadget guide. So much in love with shiny new toys, it's unnatural."). Joel Johnson is a little unhappy about the "disgusting cycle of gadget whoring." No doubt the column's a deliberate rant, but it's fun—and some of it makes a lot of sense. He begins: "Consumer electronics are a joke. It's everyone's fault but mine. You assholes." He discusses the nonsense of writing about Hot New Stuff—chewing up press releases, fielding PR emails and would-be phone meetings (I've dealt with this, oddly enough), and the extent to which "you guys just ate it up."

His suggestion for early adopters: "Stop buying this crap. Just stop it. You don't need it. Wait a year until the reviews come out and the other suckers too addicted to having the very latest and greatest buy it, put up a review, and have moved on to something else. Stop buying broken products and then shrugging your shoulders when it doesn't do what it is supposed to. Stop buying products that serve any other master than you. Use older stuff that works. Make it yourself. Only buy new stuff from companies that have proven themselves good servants of their customers in the past…"

He has his own description for early adopters of gadgetry: "You're really just a loose confederation of marks the consumer electronics industry uses as free market research and easy money." Fun stuff (and, of course, the commenters who didn't like what he had to say were the ones spewing ad hominem right and left).

Multitasking, Concentration, Interruptions

Some recent items from an ongoing discussion…

Kate Grossman wrote "Stop interrupting yourself" in the March 4, 2007 Chicago *Sun-Times*. She notes the origin of the phrase "continuous partial attention": Linda Stone in the mid-1990s. Stone isn't thrilled with how it's working out as "nearly everyone" is addicted to multitasking: "Connect, connect, connect has brought us to a place where we feel overwhelmed, overstimulated and unfulfilled."

Grossman cites a number of researchers who continue to find that "continuous partial attention" or multitasking is "really just constantly interrupting ourselves"—and that doing so leads to more mistakes, slower performance, "surface-level thinking." The brain doesn't multitask; "every time you switch tasks, the brain needs time to stop and then restart." Worse yet, there's some indication that continuous multitasking may reduce your brain's capacity to "do the heavy lifting: reasoning and deliberating." That's not clear, to be sure. If it's true, it's disturbing, given that kids tend to multitask more than anyone else.

There's more to this fairly long article (for a newspaper). Andrew Dillon (UT Austin School of Information) notes that it's easier to "get lost" when you're reading from a screen rather than paper, partly because it's a slower process, partly because pathways are less clear. Toward the end of the article, Stone is quoted as saying that people are "increasingly looking for ways to lower the noise"—ways to carve out time for full attention. Oddly, Lee Rainie of Pew is quoted as suggesting that people find constant interruptions to be difficult—but, as you'd expect, he comes down on the side that continuous partial attention is "a permanent condition of post-industrial life"—and one Pew seems to favor in its reports.

Jason the "Pragmatic librarian" discusses his own antipathy for feeds in a March 21, 2007 post, "Feed me!" (pragmaticlibrarian.wordpress.com). He doesn't want to be "converted" to an aggregator user, partly because "it seems that if you get a notification about updates, you have an obligation to zip to the website immediately." He grumps about "RSS bigots" and notes that he doesn't feature a feed on his blog. He also wonders whether aggregators could make people lose out on new sources because they keep viewing their aggregated sources.

In this case, to the extent that people *do* have live notification when something's changed in their aggregator, and *do* feel obliged to go check it out, then maybe he's right: Aggregators have "the potential to induce an enervating cocktail of laziness and information overload." But in my experience, the second part isn't true because the first isn't. I don't keep an aggregator visible on my screen, and see no reason to do so; there's nothing that notifies me when one of my 400+ feeds has changed. I check feeds at my leisure, just as Pragmatic checks websites—but it's a whole lot faster for me to skip over the 90% (or more) of sites that haven't changed since yesterday.

The New York *Times* chimes in on multitasking in a March 25, 2007 article by Steve Lohr: "Slow down, multitaskers; don't read in traffic." The piece summarizes several recent research reports on the problems with multitasking and offers some advice: Check email messages no more than once an hour. "Soothing background music" can improve concentration (if it's truly background music—my own little problem) but other distractions (including songs with lyrics) hamper performance. "In short, the answer appears to lie in managing the technology, instead of merely yielding to its incessant tug." One of the studies is a little frightening: When Vanderbilt researchers used MRI to see what happened when people were given two tasks requiring multitasking, it took *up to a second* longer to respond to a given task—which is a long time if you're driving 60 miles an hour and talking on a cell phone. One second is 88 feet. Do you drive far enough behind other cars that you can add 88 feet to your car's braking requirements? Worse yet, when it comes to *serious* thinking, Microsoft's own studies conclude that its workers take an average of *fifteen minutes* to return to "serious mental tasks" after responding to email or instant messages.

Here's an interesting one: Using a controlled task, 18- to 21-year olds did 10% better than 35- to 39-year olds when there were no interruptions—but the older group did just as well when there were interruptions.

43 folders (www.43folders.com) had a comment on the *Times* article on March 26, 2007. The writer was particularly impressed by the Microsoft study and also cites an estimate of $650 billion a year in lost productivity due to interruptions—but most estimates of "lost productivity" are silly. Early comments on this piece are interesting. One says that the 15-minute delay is well known; another points out the need for mental breaks (but multitasking isn't quite the same thing); another thinks we can learn to "multitask better."

Slightly off to one side—but only slightly—is a Reuters story from April 18 that extends the 90:9:1 rule for participation a little further. According to a study by Hitwise, those figures are *way* too generous for YouTube and Flickr, although the numbers have an apples-and-oranges feel. Specifically, only 0.2% of visits to Flickr are to upload new photos—and only 0.16% of visits to YouTube are to upload video. But that doesn't equate at all to percentage of *visitors*, since it's entirely possible (even likely) that contributors to either site are likely to view contributions a lot more often than they upload contributions. If anything, the peculiar number may be the exception: Hitwise says that 4.6% of Wikipedia visits are to edit entries on the site. That seems odd.

I'm ending this cluster with one that's *not* in chronological order but links to one of the big essays in this issue: "Twitter TOO good?" posted March 15, 2007 by Kathy Sierra at *Creating passionate users* (headrush.typepad.com/creating_passionate_users/). Sierra starts right out: "Twitter scares me." Why? Because it's a near-perfect example of "intermittent variable reward," what makes slot machines addictive; because its "feeling of connectedness" leads to a false sense of meaningful social interaction; but mostly because it's "yet another—potentially more dramatic—contribution to the problems of always-on multitasking." Sierra also says she's in a tiny minority on this one, "so I'm mostly likely way wrong."

I'll skip the slot-machine argument for now and give short shrift to the semi-meaningful connectedness argument. It may be true that "coffee with your next-door neighbor could do more for your brain than a thousand Twitter updates." But the heart of it, illustrated with one of Sierra's classic graphs, is "Twitter is the best/worst cause of continuous partial attention." The graph, in this case, shows time between interruptions for various things as they're widely adopted, with a key junction being the "brain thrashing threshold—essentially, when there are so many interruptions that you can never think deeply. She sees twittering as causing the time between interruptions to approach zero, "i.e. we're screwed"—but her graph says we're screwed anyway, with MySpace, RSS, blogs, and IM all being past the critical threshold.

Sierra likes "flow," a concept that has never sat well with me; I'd call it "mindfulness" or "deep thinking." There seems relatively little doubt that constant interruptions interfere with—prevent?—deep thinking. She claims that brain scientists now say that becoming an expert is largely a matter of being able to focus; if that's true, then continuous partial attention prevents expertise.

There's a caveat here: Sierra agrees that Twitter can have benefits and can be used "responsibly," although as a loner she's inherently not in the Twitter target audience (which, Steven C., is one reason you 're unlikely to see me twittering). Mostly she's saying is "beyond the hype, we should consider just how far down the rabbit hole of always-on-attention we really want to go."

Lots of comments, of course: Sierra is (was, actually) a high-profile blogger who says contentious things. Given the dynamics of most blogs, it's about as you'd expect: Most people commenting *on this post* agree with Sierra (only seven out of 88 clearly disagree, with one of them using loaded language in that disagreement and another using the usual "you just don't understand" response to any skepticism)—and Sierra even notes that this is typical and points to another blog where those who are pro-Twitter are commenting favorably on a pro-Twitter post.

I was doing something I don't usually do while writing this segment of Trends & Quick Takes. I was multitasking—checking some other things running simultaneously. Does it show?

Quicker Takes

I did a little post on Vista a few weeks ago, not because I'm using it but because I was hearing a little nonsense (e.g., "wait for SP2!"). My basic conclusion was that you don't want to move to Vista until you're ready to buy a new PC—and that you definitely want a machine that's comfortable with Vista Home Premium or better, which means at least 1GB RAM, probably a dual-core CPU (which you want anyway!) and a contemporary graphics card with plenty of RAM. I don't remember whether I'd read Bill Machrone's January 2007 *PC Magazine* column at that point, but his headline says it: "Vista needs a new machine." He offers several reasons why Vista may be worthwhile and cool, notes that it's really *designed* for multicore CPUs, and basically says you shouldn't bother upgrading your current PC. A February 2007 *PC World* test report seems to back up part of this: On single-core machines, Vista ran significantly slower than XP (5% to 23%)—but when multitasking on dual-core systems, Vista was substantially faster (29% to 31%), albeit still slower on some games not yet designed for multiprocessing.

- Is portable video the next big thing or dead on arrival? Christopher Jones argues the latter in a February 2007 *Perfect Vision* column. He notes that watching a real movie on a video iPod is absurd and wonders how often people actually watch videos on the go. Turns out that, according to Nielsen, the answer is "not much." Less than one percent of content played on iPods or iTunes was video; the percentage wasn't much higher for video iPod owners. As Jones puts it, consumers watch mobile videos about as often as they watch C-Span. This shouldn't be surprising. It's a "royal pain" to encode video for portable devices—and they've found that you need at least a 7" screen to watch movies without eyestrain. And that's too big a screen for a handheld/pocketable portable.
- According to a *Media Life* piece by Heidi Dawley (January 30, 2007), online retail is starting to plateau as a percentage of total retail sales. JupiterResearch predicts that online will wind up with 10% to 15% of total sales—but the internet as an "influencer of sales" will continue to be more important. This isn't surprising; even Amazon's founder has said he doesn't expect online to capture more than 20% or so of book sales. Most of us continue to do most of our shopping in real stores—but we're increasingly likely to do some of the research online.
- I'm delighted to report *D-Lib Magazine*'s funding issues may be looking brighter. The new D-Lib Alliance will provide financial and advisory support. You'll find a list of participants at www.dlib.org/dlib/march07/alliance/03alliance.html
- Ryan Healy posted "Twentysomething: 7 ways to motivate your millennial" at *Brazen careerist* (blog.penelopetrunk.com) on April 9, 2007. The short version: Be spontaneous, give me feedback, ask for feedback, "an optional reward system" (e.g., extra vacation time instead of a raise), keep me in the loop, be my friend, it doesn't hurt to smile. Constant readers know I like to poke at gen-gen now and then. Here, I wonder why these practices (generally good ideas, although "friend" can be a little tricky) apply more to so-called millennials than to anyone else?
- Speaking of business advice that cuts across generations, Robert I. Sutton offers an excerpt from his new book at *Law.com* (www.law.com, dated February 20). The title of the excerpt and the primary title of the book: "The no-asshole rule." I won't offer extensive excerpts or even the seven key lessons, but here are the first and last—and the last rings true (the

Firesign Theatre said it many years ago: I think we're all bozos on this bus): "A few demeaning creeps can overwhelm the warm feelings generated by hordes of civilized people"—and "Assholes are us." What? You've never been a jerk? Really? Those wings must get awfully heavy at times.

Net Media Perspective

Civility and Codes: A Blogging Morality Play

The morality play in précis form:

- **Prelude**: Writer finds prominence and speaking engagements with a high-profile blog playing a role. "Her" may (or may not) be a significant word in this play.
- **Act I, Scene 1:** Mean-spirited bloggers (some of them high-profile) start blogs specifically devoted to snarkiness (or abuse or incivility, depending on your view). Someone—or ones—known or unknown uses blogs to poke fun at, or abuse, or seem to threaten the high-profile female writer. (I believe the only two choices are "abuse or seem to threaten" in this case.) Someone else emails what's regarded as a threat. The high-profile writer takes the threats seriously, cancels very high profile speaking engagement, stops blogging, calls the cops.
- **Act I, Scene 2**: The blogosphere explodes in a combination of sympathy for the high-profile woman, accusations against those who set up the mean-spirited blogs *and* against the woman, calls for reason and much evidence of unreason.
- **Act I, Scene 3**: Mainstream media picks up the story. Those already so inclined use it as another excuse to bash bloggers.
- **Act II, Scene 1**: Very high profile blogger (and publisher) thinks it's Time for a Code—a blogging code of conduct that would prevent such unfortunate occurrences. Voluntary, of course, just as the Comics Code and Hayes Office were both voluntary.
- **Act II, Scene 2**: Some bloggers support the idea without paying attention to the consequences. Other bloggers dissect the code in considerable detail or just make fun of it. The addition of *badges* to the proposed code makes it easier for sensible people to deride the code concept.
- **Act II, Scene 3**: It becomes clear to some that the proposed code would have the usual effect of making the most powerful bloggers even more powerful. It becomes clear to many that the proposed code would have virtually no effect on incidents like the one in question *unless* it was backed by law—and that any attempt to back it with law would undermine not only blogging but also new media in general.
- **Postlude**: Life and blogging go on. Life for the female writer may have changed for the worse, at least for a while. (Some of those named in her final post may have been unfairly damaged as well.) One particularly interesting blog is no more. It becomes increasingly clear that we'll never know the whole truth of the whole abuse/threat/joke situation and that, while this particular "code of conduct" won't go anywhere, similar calls for codified civility will recur.

That's the short form. If you read *Walt at random* you know I was a minor participant in Act I, Scene 2 and Act II, Scene 3. I wrote a sympathetic post when I heard of the situation and, like some others, left that post as my only (thus most prominent) post for an entire week. I made fun of the Code of Conduct when it showed up with *badges*.

My guess is that most readers missed most or all of this. That may be a good thing but there's stuff to think about here—almost all of it in Act II. That's one reason I'm spending a whole PERSPECTIVE on this instead of the 400-word summary above. I'd also like to relate this morality play to the generally politer world of liblogs and offer some conclusions, mostly along the way. Finally, *Cites & Insights* sometimes serves as a "periodical of record"—and I believe it will be useful to revisit this in two or four or ten years to see what (if anything) was learned.

This PERSPECTIVE is mostly about Act II and the Postlude. You can find hundreds, likely thousands of archived posts that make up Act I, although the mean-spirited blogs that started the whole thing are harder to find since both were shut down and "disappeared" rather rapidly in most unbloglike fashion. I don't know any of the principals *at all*, so can't offer any comments on what actually happened other than what I've read. I'm only citing after-the-fact commentaries in Act I.

Prelude: Kathy Sierra

Kathy Sierra has written a few technical books, mostly from O'Reilly or McGraw-Hill/Osborne, mostly with her partner Bert Bates. Most prominent (according to Worldcat.org): *Head first Java* (2005). Others include *SCJP Sun certified programmer for Java 5: study guide* (2006), *SCJP Sun certified programmer & developer for Java 2 study guide* (2003), *Head first EJB* (2003) and *Head first moviemaking* (2005, with Jim Kavanagh). According to *Wikipedia* (I know, I know), she's a programming instructor and game developer.

She started *Creating passionate users* (headrush.typepad.com/creating_passionate_users/) in December 2004. It's a high-profile blog with long, thoughtful entries and informal graphs devoted to the topic in its title. I've been reading it for a while. I didn't agree with everything in the blog (no surprise there) and I'm not convinced that libraries (or businesses) should want *all* their users to be "passionate." But Sierra writes well and makes you think even if you don't always agree. I suspect she also speaks well and has had some high-profile tech conference appearances. I have no reason to doubt that Sierra knows her stuff in technical training and elsewhere.

She is also an attractive woman. I'm afraid both of those words are relevant, which may be the real tragedy of this whole saga. I believe very little of this would have happened if the writer and speaker was named Bert Sierra. I believe more of this—but still less—would have happened if Kathy Sierra was mousy, unobtrusive, unattractive or simply invisible.

Act I in Review

Robert Scoble has noted that when he mentions a woman in tech, and particularly when he includes a photo, comments seem to veer towards remarks about their bodies more than their minds. Funny how that doesn't happen with most male techies. And where there are comments, there will be *mean-spirited* comments: Snark and beyond.

Jim Turner posted one of the most coherent summaries of "the Sierra saga" at *One by one media* in segments on March 28, March 29, April 6 and April 9, 2007 (www.onebyonemedia.com) Here's some of what Turner has to say (interpolations in [square brackets]):

> The most relevant beginning was when Tara Hunt posted an article in early February about Higher Purpose. The comment section there became an emotionally debated article and during that debate, the phrase "Mean Kids" was used… [Chris Locke, Frank Paynter and others set up MeanKids.org "to formalize (and goof on) the 'mean kids' slur"]… No lines had been crossed to date. The creation of this site was to amuse those involved in the group. [There's no full list of possible MeanKids authors.]
>
> [Kathy states] that there was a "death threat" stated in her comments [on her own blog], which she deleted. There has been a number of people say that this in no way is related to any of the websites or anything else, and I must say it is obvious to me as well. This is a troll that commented on her own personal site… [I]t is not clear and not evident that this coincidental comment and the creation of the meankids.org site are at all related. I have to assume they are not. I could not find any evidence that one was related to the other. [Kathy wants to connect them.]
>
> [There were clearly tasteless and misogynistic posts at meankids.org, to the point where Paynter took the site down entirely. Chris Locke, coauthor of *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, may or may not have wanted the site to continue. Turner points out that this was the time to move forward—and that cyberbullying is a bad idea even if you're making fun of celebrities.] Some hurtful and hateful things were written on meankids.org, and some of it I have seen and now wished I had not since it was about a friend that has never done anything to deserve the post.
>
> Everyone at this time is given the opportunity to walk away, or to take a different fork in the road. It may be that here is where a threshold was reached and a poor decision was made. Chris Locke goes forward with a new venture. [Quoting Locke:] "With Mean Kids gone, I thought I'd have another go at it. After all, we were mostly having fun posting totally surreal stuff about nothing particularly relevant to anything or anyone."
>
> I don't know the chronology or number of postings. I do know that on March 15, a post I consider over the line was published. I have perhaps a lower threshold than the people visiting the site or their readers and authors. [I believe this post was about Maryam Scoble, Robert Scoble's pregnant wife; Turner cautions against reading it—if it can be found—until you're ready for it.]

Then a final and, at best, insulting picture appeared. Two days later Kathy Sierra canceled her speech, posted her reasons why—and the storm erupted. That storm involved "oh look at the mean bloggers" coverage by mainstream media, an incredible range of shouts and alarums from various points in the blog arena, and considerably more heat than light.

Part 3 of Turner's post discusses some of the people involved. If you want to go to the post and follow some of the links, be my guest. You'll certainly meet a couple of, um, interesting personalities along with some nice folks. Herewith portions of Turner's conclusions, which lead into Act II:

> I call it a debacle because it is a classic example of the power of blogs, the power of voices and the power of people and their own thoughts all coming together with disastrous results. On one hand we have the victim who has a deep feeling of fear and anxiety resultant from the actions of others. Others had a simple and one sided account of their mission and purpose. This mission and purpose was a different idea and had nothing to do with the other, until at some point–it did. Then the two met and it became something it was not intended….
>
> …This was locker room talk that got out of hand. It was some men trying desperately to be the cool guy and it turned out bad. Unfortunately it also coincided with an email to Kathy Sierra, and also coincided with the comments made and then removed from her blog. I don't believe that one had anything to do with the other and that they are totally separate events….
>
> What have we learned? O'Reilly has drafted his Code of Conduct. I have read many of the associated posts, and it does not appear to be popular with the mainstream opinion. Will O'Reilly be given death threats and will they post misogynistic things about him? Probably not. He is not the "Cute Kitty."

Were there *real* death threats? There was language that could be construed that way from a poster who has since explained, and explained, and explained that his comment "was never intended to be harmful and was, in fact, taken out of context." Did Sierra overinterpret? Quite possibly, and she does appear to have connected things that had no real connection. Her post was also incendiary in its own way—but given the circumstances (if I was an attractive high-profile woman in tech and believed, rightly or wrongly, that I had been personally threatened), I might have written an equally incendiary post. Is it plausible that an attractive woman who's faced the misogyny I've seen in tech blogs would legitimately feel threatened? Absolutely.

Dylan Tweney summarized Act I on *Wired News* on April 16, 2007: "Kathy Sierra case: Few clues, little evidence, much controversy." A few items from Tweney that aren't in Turner's coverage (which I found from Tweney's article):

> Sierra contacted the Boulder Sheriff's Department, which advised her to take the threats seriously… She attributes [the vitriolic comments] to comments she made a year ago in support of bloggers' rights to delete comments on their own blogs… The most direct threats were posted to Sierra's own blog. Sierra published the e-mail address and IP address of a commenter, "siftee," in her March 26 post, along with one of the commenter's threats, which is patently violent and sexual. The IP address indicates a user probably located in Spain, but attempts to contact this person by *Wired News* have so far been unsuccessful…

That's about as much as bears repeating about Act I. Mean things were clearly said. Threats or seeming threats were made—possibly without any connection to the mean things. Strong reactions followed, probably including accusations against the wrong people.

I probably wouldn't write about this two months later—were it not for Act II.

Act II: The Code of Conduct

Tim O'Reilly runs O'Reilly Media—O'Reilly Books (the "animal books" beloved by techies) and O'Reilly conferences. He's high profile by any standard and has a blog, *O'Reilly radar* (radar.oreilly.com). He's a friend of Kathy Sierra, and the conference appearance she cancelled was an O'Reilly conference.

On March 31, 2007, he posted a "Call for a Blogger's Code of Conduct"—six print pages when copied to Word (it's another print-unfriendly blog), with another 11 pages of comments (66 comments) by April 3. There were 170 comments when I checked on April 25, but I'm ignoring all but the first 66 for now. O'Reilly called for such a code as a response to Act I and set forth a first draft in the post. Since he followed with a more fully developed "draft code of conduct" a little later, I'll just cite the main points, each followed by one or more paragraphs of discussion in the post:

- 1. Take responsibility not just for your own words, but for the comments you allow on your blog.
- 2. Label your tolerance level for abusive comments.
- 3. Consider eliminating anonymous comments.
- 4. Ignore the trolls.
- 5. Take the conversation offline, and talk directly, or find an intermediary who can do so.
- 6. If you know someone who is behaving badly, tell them so.
- 7. Don't say anything online that you wouldn't say in person.

There's the starting point. If you think about those seven statements carefully, as a library person or as a blogger, you may see trouble. If you read the expansions, you might see more trouble. Then add the point that those proposing a code of conduct are "Alisters"—people with powerful voices, far more powerful than most other bloggers. And just to get you thinking harder, consider some sentences in the penultimate paragraph:

> We celebrate the blogosphere because it embraces frank and open conversation in ways that were long missing from mainstream media and marketing-dominated corporate websites. But frankness does not have to mean lack of civility. There's no reason why we should tolerate conversations online that we wouldn't tolerate in our living room.

Who's "we"? Nobody's telling O'Reilly what conversations *he* should engage in. If "tolerate" means something other than "allow *on my own blog*," then "we" are in trouble. If it doesn't, what's the point?

A few items from the comments—noting that, *from a reader's perspective*, there's no difference between a pseudonymous or single-name comment and an anonymous comment. The blogger frequently has more information, including the IP address from which a comment was sent, but that's of no help to the reader—and if there's a hotlink, it could be to almost any page. It's easy for a commenter to claim to be someone else, link to that person's blog or website and even use their email address. In most real-world situations, only the blogger has any chance of uncovering that deception—using the IP address—and that's not a sure thing. The actual identity of commenters is something readers usually take on trust.

Danny Sullivan didn't think a blog-specific code was needed, liked the idea of scrapping anonymity, and noted legal issues with taking responsibility for comments: It can increase your *legal* liability for what's said in comments. Several others expanded on that point. (O'Reilly responded with "I think we have to get over it," which I find appalling.) I was surprised by the extent to which commenters *agreed*—and offered "solutions" to comment problems (e.g., what happens if you go on vacation?) like "put all comments into the moderation queue" (which, as I've found, doesn't work with some blogging software). A few people noted that the code would work against newcomers and those with less time and help.

Cconsider these comments by "adamsj" (a pseudonym with a hotlink that leads to a nonexistent site—thus, in real-world terms, an anonymous poster) as part of a set of responses to other commenters who found fault with the code:

> I don't speak for Tim, but I'm pretty sure he's not suggesting a legally binding code of conduct. I wouldn't support such a thing myself, and might not support exactly what he might support in a voluntary code of conduct. In particular, if Tim wants to make lewdness in and of itself an issue, then he and I disagree. (In general, that is—if he wants *Radar* unlewd, more power to him.)
>
> A voluntary code of conduct, though, is just that—voluntary. If someone feels strongly enough that his or her speech is unreasonably limited by such a code, then they're free to violate it.
>
> [Responding to a comment:] The point is to establish norms. You're right to say people will still violate them. Given that eliminating nastiness isn't possible, reducing it without damaging free speech is still worthwhile.

When I combine "establish norms" with "code" and "voluntary," red flags go up.

- The Comics Code of 1954 was voluntary. No publisher was required to join the Comics Code Authority. All CCA membership and obedience to the "norms" of the code (which tightly constrained subject matter) meant was that you could use a badge, the CCA seal (see below about badges). The net effect of the "voluntary" code? Distributors wouldn't carry unbadged comics, putting some first-rate publishers out of business—and the state of comics stalled until underground comics undermined CCA (which still exists but mostly defines Archie Comics as upholding fine moral values).
- The MPAA Production Code (or Hays Code) was voluntary—but you'd be hard-pressed to get a movie into theaters or handled by a distributor without following the code, particularly since the studios owned most theaters at the time. If there's any code that *seriously* reduced freedom of expression, possibly even more than the Comics Code, it's the Production Code. Volunary, of course: If a moviemaker didn't like the Production Code, it could just violate it.
- The current MPAA Film Rating System is nothing more than a voluntary set of norms that leads to a badge. No studio is legally required to submit a film for rating or to use the rating in its release. No law supports the system, any more than any law supported CCA or the Production Code. (One blogger saw the analogy, but didn't believe "something like the movie ratings…" could be harmful or chilling.)
- Wouldn't an established, codified set of norms be convenient when (not if) Congress starts looking at blogs as cases where free speech

seems to be getting out of hand? Or, for that matter, when censorware makers want to make life easier for those sheltered souls who might be troubled by strong statements on blogs and in comments, adding an "unbadged blogs" setting for filters?

At least one early commenter (also effectively anonymous, with a pseudonym linking back to the post itself) was less than thrilled:

> Forgive me for being blunt, bit I think you're talking utter nonsense… As for your underhanded stratagem to censor the internet, ponder this: some people like the idea of untrammeled discourse… Some think anonymity is good. We all have thoughts we don't express due to social convention… The reason blogs have comment forms is because some people actually want to know what others really think… If you want a dialogue, be prepared to hear things you don't like… Code of conduct indeed. Next we'll be calling for UN regulation of the Internet.

I was surprised to see many comments linking all of this back to the Sierra problem, since much of that problem arose on two blogs that were *explicitly* set up in a way that would be outside any code. If the intent is not to limit free speech or establish a firm, visible, socially enforceable hierarchy of "good guys" and "bad guys," then there could be no effect: The offending blogs would have been there in any case.

Some comments were frightening, for various reasons—including this sentence in a calm, *signed* comment: "Speech must be governed to be free." So much for the First Amendment. Then came *the badges*.

Draft code of conduct—with badges!

On April 8, O'Reilly posted a draft code, identified a new website to host that code—and, about seven days late for appropriate impact, created a *badge* for "Civility Enforced" blogs. Here's the draft code in full as it appears in that post:

> We celebrate the blogosphere because it embraces frank and open conversation. But frankness does not have to mean lack of civility. We present this Blogger Code of Conduct in hopes that it helps create a culture that encourages both personal expression and constructive conversation.
>
> 1. We take responsibility for our own words and for the comments we allow on our blog.
>
> We are committed to the "Civility Enforced" standard: we will not post unacceptable content, and we'll delete comments that contain it.
>
> We define unacceptable content as anything included or linked to that:
>
> - is being used to abuse, harass, stalk, or threaten others
>
> - is libelous, knowingly false, ad-hominem, or misrepresents another person,
>
> - infringes upon a copyright or trademark
>
> - violates an obligation of confidentiality
>
> - violates the privacy of others
>
> We define and determine what is "unacceptable content" on a case-by-case basis, and our definitions are not limited to this list. If we delete a comment or link, we will say so and explain why. [We reserve the right to change these standards at any time with no notice.]
>
> 2. We won't say anything online that we wouldn't say in person.
>
> 3. We connect privately before we respond publicly.
>
> When we encounter conflicts and misrepresentation in the blogosphere, we make every effort to talk privately and directly to the person(s) involved—or find an intermediary who can do so—before we publish any posts or comments about the issue.
>
> 4. When we believe someone is unfairly attacking another, we take action.
>
> When someone who is publishing comments or blog postings that are offensive, we'll tell them so (privately, if possible—see above) and ask them to publicly make amends.
>
> If those published comments could be construed as a threat, and the perpetrator doesn't withdraw them and apologize, we will cooperate with law enforcement to protect the target of the threat.
>
> 5. We do not allow anonymous comments.
>
> We require commenters to supply a valid email address before they can post, though we allow commenters to identify themselves with an alias, rather than their real name.
>
> 6. We ignore the trolls.
>
> We prefer not to respond to nasty comments about us or our blog, as long as they don't veer into abuse or libel. We believe that feeding the trolls only encourages them—"Never wrestle with a pig. You both get dirty, but the pig likes it." Ignoring public attacks is often the best way to contain them.

Did I say "badge" (a shiny six-pointed job straight out of the Old West)? I meant "badges." There's another one, a circle with a lit firecracker labeled "Anything Goes." The draft definition—yep, there's even a definition for those who fight the sheriff:

> This is an open, uncensored forum. We are not responsible for the comments of any poster, and when discussions get heated, crude language, insults and other "off color" comments may be encountered. Participate in this site at your own risk.

This didn't just come from Tim O'Reilly—it came from "we" (consistently used in the post). And "we" aren't just putting it forth, "we" plan to "finalize that code" after a review period. Sounds serious, doesn't it?

Checking the post on April 26, I see 336 comments—after all, bigshot bloggers get a lot more comments and this was a Very Serious Post. If you could just get past those badges. **Badges**!

The very first comment, from someone who'd been peripherally involved in Act I:

> You created badges.
>
> You actually created badges.
>
> I just can't believe you created badges.

The next commenter, while finding the badges "a little hokey" (a *little* hokey?) thought "the guidelines are okay." Others thought the points "could apply to web sites in general…especially forums." I'm not willing to skim 336 comments, but I was astonished by the number of people who thought the Code idea (badges or not) was peachy-keen. Fortunately, quite a few saw both specific problems and the general problem with this or any other "voluntary code" promoted by high-profile bloggers. Some used strong language to say so; others started to take the code apart. If you have the time and interest, the comments are mostly all there (O'Reilly deleted a few, *which is his privilege* since it's his blog).

Rather than further comment on the comments, let's turn to some related posts on other blogs and items in the mainstream press.

Deciphering the code

Because I don't cite Seth Finkelstein much in this discussion, I should note that I picked up some of the most useful links from his posts at *Infothought* (sethf.com/infothought/blog/), and recommend that you pay attention to what he has to say.

Robert Scoble (scobleizer.com), an A-list blogger in his own right—whose wife was another victim in Act I—posted "Code of conduct or not?" on April 8, 2007. He notes that he's "not able to currently sign this"—he allows anonymous comments, engages with his trolls and doesn't much believe in back channels:

> I've broken the "talk privately" plank several times before and I'm not sure I would be able to stay true to that one, either. I blog. I don't back channel. I don't beg for links behind your back the way many other sites do (and sometimes even require). If I have a problem with something you wrote on your blog I think we should play it out in public. If I'm wrong, that'll be part of the public record. I don't like back room "deals" between bloggers. Makes me wonder what else they are doing in the back room.

He saw the key problem with this "voluntary code":

> I do find disquieting the social pressure to get on board with this program. Tim O'Reilly is a guy who really can affect one's career online (and off, too). I do have to admit that I feel some pressure just to get on board here and that makes me feel very uneasy.

A few items from the string of comments: "Chris" said, in part:

> I read your blog regularly, but I rarely comment (this post being one of those rare exceptions). If I had to register or go through some sort of e-mail verification procedure each time, quite frankly I wouldn't bother. Now, given the relative sparseness of my comments, individually I probably wouldn't be all that great a loss. However, I think that the overall level of conversation benefits from people who see a post they're interested in being able to easily dash off a quick comment. The more obstacles that are put in the way of casual or one-time posters, the more insular a community will become.

An anonymous commenter said, "This whole thing seems to me a solution in search of a problem" but added something a little more ominous: "I'm posting this anonymously because I have worked with O'Reilly and probably will again, and I too feel pressure."

Paul Jacobsen noted that a British company has been "going on about a code of conduct for bloggers for a little while now" and that there'd need to be a "more formal structure that accredits bloggers" for this to be of any use. Mike Gunderloy noted: "It may not have been Tim's original intent, but people are already starting to use this to draw a black-and-white line between 'follows the "Civility Enforced" rules and "Anything Goes."' Gunderloy noted the huge gap in between and that lots of "bloggers of good faith" could get "lumped in with the freefire zones as this debate degenerates to namecalling."

Kathy Sierra herself noted that she had nothing to do with this Code, it would have made no difference in her situation, and she doesn't see how it would change anything. "Webomatica" offered three observations, the most cogent (in my opinion) being this one:

> This sounds like yet another barrier towards encouraging open debate on blogs. Blogging is challenging enough already and now it's like, oh you want to start a blog? By the way, here's a code of conduct you need to follow.

Some people offered variants of "Well? Where's *your* code?" and "something *must* be done." Most people were on Scoble's side—just as most commenters on O'Reilly's post were on his side. That's the way blogs work.

On April 9, mainstream media weighed in—a New York *Times* story by Brad Stone, "A call for manners in the world of nasty blogs." Turns out (see "O'Reilly returns" below) O'Reilly knew about this in advance, a privilege only enjoyed by a select group of bloggers. The article focuses on the code of conduct from "a few high-profile figures in high-tech." It identifies as "chief among the recommendations" that "bloggers consider banning anonymous comments left by visitors to their pages and be able to delete threatening or libelous comments without facing cries of censorship." That's false: the code doesn't say "*consider* banning anonymous comments," it says "We do not allow anonymous comments," period. It never mentions censorship and includes "threaten" and "libelous" as two of a dozen types of "unacceptable content." Stone says O'Reilly *and Jimmy Wales* (who seemed later to back off away fromresponsibility other than hosting a Wikia discussion) talked about "creating several sets of guidelines…and seals of approval represented by logos," but that's not what the draft code showed. A quote from Jimmy Wales helps clarify the nature of "voluntary" in this case:

> "If it's a carefully constructed set of principles, it could carry a lot of weight even if not everyone agrees," Mr. Wales said.

"A lot of weight"? For a wholly voluntary set of principles? Hmm. The reporter says "Ms. Sierra said she supported the new efforts to improve civility on the Web"—slightly at odds with her own explicit comment. The article closes with a classic O'Reilly statement that confuses me more, the more I reread it:

> Mr. O'Reilly said the guidelines were not about censorship. "That is one of the mistakes a lot of people make—believing that uncensored speech is the most free, when in fact, managed civil dialogue is actually the freer speech," he said. "Free speech is enhanced by civility."

We now have an explicit *defense* of censorship and a call for "managed civil dialogue." Given that context, the final sentence has a remarkably Orwellian cast.

Tristan Louis posted a fairly thorough "fisking" of the Code of Conduct on April 9, 2007 in "Blogger's code of conduct: a dissection" (www.tnl.net/blog/). Louis is one who believes "codes of conducts will generally result in lowering the value of internet speech." He raises the question: "who considers what proper civil discourse?" and notes that civility has generally been seen as the enemy of openness, dating back to the Federalist papers and beyond. Louis continues: Who gets to define terms like "abuse, harass…" or what constitutes "infringing" on a trademark? Very few blogs use "Google®" in text; does that failure constitute trademark infringement? He notes the important journalism made possible by selectively ignoring other tenets in the code and wonders what type of action is implied in #4 (above). There's a lot more in the post, but I'll close with Louis' final paragraph, which includes a quotation from the Supreme Court decision striking down CDA:

> [B]ecause I believe that "the interest in encouraging freedom of expression in a democratic society outweighs any theoretical but unproven benefit of censorship," I have to say that this code is not only a bad idea but one that should strenuously be rejected by members of the blogosphere.

Naturally, one commenter fell back on "you've entirely missed the point" and "there can be no recriminations for its misuse"—in which case, it's entirely pointless. Another asserted that O'Reilly's code was nothing more than "a statement by one blogger (and those others who choose to agree with him) as to how he intends to run his blog," which begs the question: Then why wasn't the post labeled "A draft code of conduct for *O'Reilly's Radar*"? Another pseudonymous comment says Louis is "parsing with a microscope," trivializes the code and gets to the reality: "I'm afraid that all this 'freedom' pollutes many, many corners of the internet." Sigh. Free speech always has been a nuisance, hasn't it?

Blogging.wikia.com hosts a page and discussion (or, rather, many discussions). When I checked it on April 9, it was largely fine-tuning suggestions of the grand code schema; now it seems to have morphed into something different. I won't attempt to summarize; there's just too much there.

I won't quote much from "Fetch the smelling salts!" posted April 10, 2007 at *The invisible library*—the language is a little strong for my own sites and their informal codes—but Keith Kisser starts out noting that "we uncouth bloggers are giving some folks the vapors" (citing a BBC story) and notes that readers have presumably already decided "if you're going to be offended by my loose language…or read through to the end to see if I make a valid point or not. And that's all the blogging ethics we'll ever need. Read my words or don't. Agree, or don't." Later, he notes:

> The problem is that the Internet is a free medium and that scares the shit out of some people. It means unpopular opinions that might have some validity have an opportunity to get heard and to spread and become popular opinions, all without gatekeepers or some au-

> thority figure giving the thumbs up. It allows for culture to be spread and evolve organically, in the hands of anyone with a desire to contribute, not just the monied elite who, for most of human history, were the arbiters of taste and expression. Now that it is no longer so, there is fear that we, the unwashed, foul mouthed masses will have a say. And that, my friends, means the end of the way things used to be.

Ah yes, the way things used to be. I was a student at UC Berkeley starting in 1962, and studied or worked there until 1979. Some of us old fogies had something to say about free speech. Some of us got teargassed about it. Some of them (not me) went to jail about it. Disliking restrictions on free speech goes back *at least* to the Federalist papers in the U.S., and a lot further back elsewhere.

John Scalzi weighed in on April 10, 2007 at *Whatever* with "Pardon me while I roll my eyes" (www.scalzi.com/whatever/). He notes that it's *his* site "and I couldn't care less about how anyone else thinks it should be run." He feels the same way about other sites: "It's their site, let them do what they want." And the third point: "Who elected Tim O'Reilly and Jimmy Wales the hall monitors of the Internet?" He outlines his own rules and why he's not interested in a "community" code of conduct. He wonders why people "apparently *forgot* they have the right *on their own sites* to tell obnoxious dickheads to shut the hell up." (If you're wondering where my own line for civil discourse runs, "dickheads" is on the appropriate side of it and I might or might not have censored a different four-letter word before "up.") Scalzi concludes, sensibly in my book:

> What the blog world needs is *not* a universal "Code of Conduct"; what it needs is for people to remind themselves that deleting comments from obnoxious dickheads is a good thing. It's simple: if someone's an obnoxious dickhead, then *pop!* goes their comment. You don't even have to explain why, although it is always fun to do so. The commenter will either learn to abide by your rules, or they will go away. Either way, your problem is solved. You don't need community policing or a code of conduct to make it happen. You just do it.

O'Reilly returns

On April 11, 2007, Tim O'Reilly posted a fairly long response, "Code of Conduct: Lessons learned so far." He admits the badges were poorly chosen, but reiterates that badges might be useful. He understands the need for "a more modular code of conduct"—but that's still a code. He considers "moderation mechanisms" and the difference between "constructive anonymity" and "drive-by anonymity." He acknowledges that a code of conduct would require legal review to avoid increased liability for bloggers—and he says, "Civility matters, despite all the nay-sayers."

The story makes it clear that O'Reilly knew a New York *Times* story was happening—he is, after all, a Big-Deal Blogger with mainstream media connections. He gives that as an excuse for the hamhanded nature of the badges: "We were a little rushed by the timing of the New York *Times* story, and wanted to put something up for people to react to." He finds himself "particularly perplexed by folks like Jeff Jarvis" asserting that they don't require pledges—because, O'Reilly asserts, Jarvis *does* have "just such a 'badge'"—that is, a link citing the "rules of engagement" for Jarvis' *buzzmachine* and another providing disclosures on Jarvis' financial connections. But *that's not a badge*; it's local transparency. Jarvis (I'm not a Jarvis fanboy, not by a longshot) is saying "here's how I do things," not attaching a set of Codes. O'Reilly says his goal "was to propose a system that would make it easier for sites to state their policies without having to write their own"—but that's not what he did and it's not clear that anything called a Code could ever work that way. People either make their practices explicit or they don't; most of us who don't state explicit practices have pretty clear *implicit* ones.

O'Reilly suggests building mechanisms like Slashdot's moderation policy into the major blogging platforms. Really? I love comments. I don't believe I'm willing to have commenters determine the quality of other comments *on my blog*.

As for civility still mattering—I agree, but that has nothing to do with a formalized Code. It's up to me to decide how much incivility I'll practice or tolerate *on my blog*. Calls for broader intolerance of civility raise a nasty question, "Whose civility?"

Here's two statements:

- Race should not be a societal issue where marriage is concerned.
- Gender should not be a societal issue where marriage is concerned.

In the 19th century and part of the 20th century, the first statement would be considered seriously uncivil, tending toward riot. Right now, many people—probably the majority in some states, *certainly* the majority in some religious groups—consider the second statement to be uncivil and outrageous.

I question the relationship of O'Reilly's Code to civility as I view it. To me, nearly all that need be said about civility can be boiled down to one sentence:

Treat others at least as well as you'd hope to have them treat you.

I'll sign up for that code, even if I don't always follow it perfectly. Beyond that, things get fuzzy—and when fuzziness rules, so do the most prominent people within an area.

Comments on this O'Reilly post are all over the place, with most people (of course) being on O'Reilly's side. As always, Seth Finkelstein offers well thought out criticisms in his own sometimes-querulous tone (I haven't quoted many of them because they don't fit this narrative well, but they're definitely good comments). Joe Clark provided a good summary, although it leaves out the many supporters:

> Essentially, people called bullshit on every point of your "code of conduct." You concede most of their points, but won't give it up. Captains go down with their ships. But so do barnacles.
>
> Your sermon from the mount—really, the apotheosis of an A-lister talking down to the little people—has been rejected by your subjects, and you're the only one who doesn't know it yet.

Ian Rennie noted the problem with "voluntary" codes that people are perfectly free to ignore:

> The same way that movie producers are "perfectly free" to ignore voluntary MPAA ratings guidelines. That is, if they don't mind their movie not being shown anywhere ever.
>
> And comic book publishers in the 1960s and 1970s were "perfectly free" not to submit their comics to the CCA for approval. That is, if they didn't mind not being listed in catalogues by comic book distributors.

A few more comments

Two true statements:

- For 99% of the world, including probably 95% to 99% of all bloggers, this whole controversy was of no importance. It may have been on O'Reilly's radar, but most people had better things to do.
- That 1% includes plenty of bloggers and journalists, enough to account for what I'd assume are thousands of stories on the code of conduct. A quick Bloglines word search for "blogger's code of conduct" returns 9,080 hits from blogs with at least two Bloglines subscribers. A Technorati phrase search shows 1,272 posts within the past 30 days (as of April 27, 2007). A phrase search in Ask yields 2,290 (1,020 without the apostrophe, showing 200). Yahoo! yields 230,000 (75,800 without the apostrophe) and hits the 1,000-item limit before it runs out of real sites. Google claims 113,000 without the apostrophe, showing 494.

A sidebar for anyone who *still* believes that reported search numbers in mainstream media mean much: leave off the quotes and Google yields more than four million, but still won't show more than 1,000.

There is no way I'm going to review 9,080 or 1,272 or even 200 different sites. Here are a few I picked up after April 11—and some of them wouldn't show up in those results.

Jon Garfunkel thinks a lot about media structures and the like in *Civilities* (civilities.net). He wrote a series of posts beginning April 11 promoting his own "comment management responsibility" proposal, which would define a "vocabulary" to embed your own code of conduct in metadata—metadata that could then be used by "community management software." I'm not going to dissect *or* congratulate, although I'm deeply doubtful. If you're interested, you know where to go. As always, Garfunkel will give you something to think about.

Back in the liblog arena, Scott Vine (*Information overlord)* posted "Do unto others" on April 12. "Hey, let's all have a blog code of conduct and then we can all be nice to one another…" He assumes O'Reilly is "a wiser man than me"—one of those assumptions I'm usually too crude to make. (I have *no idea* whether O'Reilly is wiser than me or than Vine, although he's certainly more successful.) He calls the proposed code "stupid and unworkable" and says:

> Most people know how to behave on and offline—those who do not or who just don't wish to are not going to change their ways because someone tells them there is a blogger's code—indeed this would, I think, make them even more determined not to adhere to such a code's principles.

Another British liblogger spoke up two days later: Tom Roper posted "Tim O'Reilly's proposed code of conduct: I speak out" on April 14, 2007 He summarizes the proposed code and says, "As far as I am concerned most of this is either banal or unnecessary." He offers his own proposals to bring civility to the Internet:

> 1. Gentlemen bloggers should doff their hats when commenting on a lady blogger's post.
>
> 2. Wait to be introduced to someone before sending them digital pictures of your genitals.
>
> 3. The order of precedence should be strictly adhered to in determing who should comment first. It would be unthinkable if the younger son of a marquess were to have to post after one of the Lords Spritual or a Knight of the Garter.

Ronni Bennett of *Time goes by* is an "elderblogger" some few years older than I am, a former TV and radio news and documentary producer and editor until she encountered age discrimination. She's one of those over-sixty folks who one commenter feel could only be comfortable with blogging and the like if there was a strong Code of Conduct in place. Her commentary, "Still don't need no stinkin' badges," appeared April 15, 2007. Since I'm another over-60 blogger I can tell you I'm with her on that part of her response:

> It always makes me guffaw to hear young people who believe elders' pacemakers will crash at the mention of the word f**k. We're here, Bob. Been here a long time.

As far as the code's concerned, she notes that O'Reilly purchased the domain bloggingcode.org, "effectively ensuring that he and *the corporate entity* that bears his name control what that code is." She precedes that by noting that O'Reilly "continues to flog this reckless idea even more determinedly." Later, she says—correctly, I believe: "Adoption of badges linked to a common set of rules (even of the modular, pick-and-choose-your-favorites variety) cannot but come coercive, particularly when endorsed by someone as widely known as Mr. O'Reilly." After quoting Seth Finkelstein approvingly, she says: "There is a more fundamental issue to this than one A-list celebrity's ego gone wild. It is the inherent censorship involved with badges and common codes."

There's more, in a well-written post worth reading on its own (ronnibennett.typepad.com/weblog/). I'll include one additional paragraph after Jay Rosen's comment, "Blogs are little First Amendment machines":

> Rudeness, profanity and incivility are not crimes. It is dangerous to allow self-appointed police to regulate them, and it is naive to think, as has been argued by some slow-witted supporters, that the code and badges O'Reilly proposes are voluntary and therefore neutral. Whenever a powerful person who believes he holds the moral high ground anoints one class of people over others, dissenters are *ipso facto* oppressed.

Postlude: Conclusions

Will a Bloggers Code of Conduct, badges or not, become a significant part of the blog universe or the web as a whole? Probably not. At least not this time.

Most bloggers aren't journalists, but some are Many bloggers have an exaggerated opinion of their own worth or importance. Many commenters need a session or two on rage management. Too many bloggers need to recognize that *it is their own blog* and it's not censorship to say "no, you can't put that text *on my space*" when comments are unacceptable by the blogger's standards. Some commenters and bloggers are pseudonymous for good and valid reasons. Some are those called "anonymous cowards" by some software or the related category of trolls. The first category is important to the survival of dissent and new ideas. The second and third categories are the price we pay for true free speech—but those of us who blog can *and should* delete those comments we regard as inappropriate. *Following our own standards*, not those of a Code.

Want to require registration for comments? That's your decision. Want to moderate all comments? Not a bad decision for many bloggers. Want to prevent anonymous and pseudonymous comments? Good luck: That's difficult to do without nearly locking down commenting. At least one of my favorite blogs doesn't allow comments at all.

I believe in civility. I try to steer well clear of libel or abuse. I try to avoid telling secrets or making anyone more public than they'd wish to be. I recognize that *ad hominem* is a logical fallacy even as I sometimes (rarely, I hope) find it a useful real-world filter.

I reject the notion of a Code of Conduct as injurious to free and healthy debate. As should, I believe, every librarian. Yes, we sometimes need codes for "official" blogs and those that can't be separated from our places of work, but those codes should be very brief, very specific and very well known. That's not the proposed Code of Conduct. We do not, in fact, need any stinkin' badges.

Masthead

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