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The Front

Erehwon Community Library: A \$4 to \$1 Example

A good public library is at the heart of any healthy community, and the true value provided by a good library is hard to measure. That value includes children whose road to literacy begins at the library; newly employed workers who use the library to improve their skills and find jobs; every patron who learns something new or enriches their life using library resources; and the myriad ways a good public library strengthens its community as a community center and resource.

Those anecdotes and uncounted benefits make up the flesh and blood of a public library's story—but there are also the bones: *countable* benefits, including those reported every year. Even including only those countable benefits, public libraries offer excellent value: by my conservative calculation, most provide more than \$4 in benefits for every \$1 in spending.

So what?

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So this: Public libraries with *better* funding *continue* to show a high ratio of benefits to cost. That's significant, especially as communities recover economically and libraries seek an appropriate share of improved community revenues.

Those are the first four paragraphs of [\\$4 to \\$1: Public Library Benefits and Budgets](#). Here's a little more:

This book and the companion state-by-state study have two purposes:

- To offer a detailed overview of public library benefits in 2011 and how they changed from 2009
- To help librarians, Friends and other library supporters tell your library's story, seeing how it compares to similar libraries on a range of countable measures.

These two volumes grow out of the earlier *Give Us a Dollar and We'll Give You Back Four* (2012-13), based in 2010 data and consisting primarily of tables. I recommend either *The Incomplete Give Us a Dollar...* as a print book or the two ebook volumes of *The Complete Give Us a Dollar...*, still available from Lulu, which combine graphs, tables and commentary and provide a more extensive background for this book.

By comparison to the earlier book, this book includes more libraries, breaks library sizes down into fewer groups, simplifies other measures somewhat and reports fewer measures. But it also adds 2009-2011 changes, graphs where appropriate, more detailed tables and textual commentary on what's in the graphs and tables. Because all of that requires considerably more space, what was a single book is now two volumes: one by library size, one by state. (Most of this chapter and all of Chapter 2 are common to both so that the two books are each complete without reference to the other. The second volume may or may not appear, and if so will appear later.)

No more quotations. You may or may not know that the book is off to a slow start. (That overstates the success of the book, actually...) I don't know whether this will help, but I thought I'd provide a quick example of what a library could determine from the book—and how it might or might not help the Friends or the librarians tell the library's story to funding agencies.

Erehwon Community Library

This mythical library, in Erehwon, Alabama, is the average of two actual libraries, each having the median library service area population for 2011: 7,092 potential patrons. In most ways, the two libraries are quite different, so this profile doesn't represent either of them. (Neither one is in Alabama: I've moved Erehwon there so that I can offer notes on what Volume 2 could offer, if it ever happens.)

The Figures

Here's what Erehwon Community Library received when they sent me email (or what they already knew):

LSA	7,092
\$/Cap	\$38.20
Chg\$/Cap	4.4%
Circ/Cap	5.1
ChgCirc/C	-17.5%
Vis/Cap	3.1
ChgVis/C	15.5%
Ref/Cap	1.25
ChgRef/C	-6.1%
Att/Cap	0.23
ChgAtt/C	12.6%
PC/Cap	0.54
ChgPC/C	33.3%
Vis/Hr	8.66
ChgVis/H	12.5%

I suspect the labels are easy enough to unravel, but just in case, they are: LSA (legal service area), spending per capita, change in spending per capita (from 2009 to 2011), circulation per capita, change in circulation per capita, patron visits per capita, change in patron visits per capita, reference transactions per capita, change in reference transactions per capita, program attendance per capita, change in program attendance per capita, visits per hour, change in visits per hour.

National Comparisons

Here's how Erehwon compares to public libraries across the board:

- Spending is actually about average—that is, below the average but well above the median. It's in the \$30 to \$39.99 bracket, the middle bracket. 34% of libraries are in higher spending brackets; 49% are in lower brackets.
- The change in spending is better than most, in the third of six brackets (2% to 8% increases)—with 32% in higher brackets, 49% lower.
- Circulation per capita is lower than most, in the fourth of six brackets (and near the bottom of that bracket). Half of libraries do significantly better; 35% do worse. There's a strong correlation between spending and circulation, and that's probably the most important and demonstrable correlation in the book. For its spending level, it's in the bottom quarter of circulation per capita, but not in the bottom tenth.
- Circulation dropped substantially, more than in most libraries—it's in the bottom bracket, with 83% of libraries doing better. For its spending level, it's not in the bottom tenth but it is in the bottom quartile.

- Visits per capita are also below most, in the fourth of six categories (and near the bottom of that bracket), with 51% doing significantly better and 25% doing worse. For its spending category, it's in the bottom 10%: 90% of libraries spending \$30 to \$39.99 per capita do better.
- But at least it's improving, quite nicely, in fact. It's not in the top bracket for changes in visits per capita (20% and up), but it's in the top half of the second (7% to 19%), with 17% of libraries doing better and 67% doing worse. For its spending category, it's in the top quarter but not the top tenth.
- Reference transactions per capita are very good—near the top of the second of six brackets (0.8 to 1.29), with 17% doing better and 68% doing worse. For its spending category, it's in the top quarter but not the top tenth.
- On the other hand, reference transactions are dropping; Erehwon is slightly worse than most libraries in this regard, in the fourth of six brackets (48% significantly better, 33% worse). For its spending category, it's in the second quarter (that is, below the median but above the first quartile).
- Program attendance per capita is mediocre, in the fourth of six brackets, with 54% doing significantly better and 32% doing worse. For its spending category, Erehwon is just into the second quartile—that is, about 25% of libraries have lower program attendance.
- As with visits, change is in the right direction, in the third of six brackets (32% doing better, 50% doing worse). For its spending category, it's in the third quartile—better than most, but not in the top 25%.
- PC use per capita is very low, in the fifth of six brackets, with 64% of libraries doing significantly better and 15% doing worse. For its spending category, it's not in the bottom 10% but it's definitely in the bottom quarter.
- Ah, but PC use is improving fast—it's near the top of the second of six brackets, with 17% of libraries doing even better and 68% doing worse. For its spending category, it's not in the top 10% but it's definitely in the top quarter.
- The library isn't especially busy, which is fairly typical for relatively small libraries. It's in the fourth of six brackets, with 50% of libraries busier and 34% less busy. For its spending category, it's in the second quarter—that is, more than 25% of libraries spending \$30 to \$39.99 per capita are less busy and more than 50% are busier.

- Finally, it's getting busier, in the second of six brackets for change in visits per hour, with 16% higher and 68% lower. For its spending category, it's in the top half but not quite in the top quarter.

Is that information useful? Will it help the library fine-tune its operations and improve funding? I can't be sure. But let's look at libraries of comparable size.

Libraries Serving 6,000 to 8,999 Patrons

This set of bullet points is based on Chapter 7 (noting that "patrons" counts people in the legal service area, not those who have registered with the library). The brackets are always going to be the same, so we'll just look at percentages.

- 32% of these libraries spend more; 49% spend *significantly* less. Roughly one-third of libraries in this size category saw spending improve more than Erehwon, while 46% did worse.
- For circulation per capita, half the libraries in this size range did significantly better, while 34% didn't do as well. In the spending category, Erehwon is a little below the 25%ile—that is, more than three-quarters of libraries had higher circulation per capita.
- For changes in circulation per capita, 34% did better and 52% did significantly worse. Erehwon is well into the third quartile for its spending category.
- More than half the libraries in this size range (52%) had significantly more patron visits per capita, while 24% had fewer. For its spending category, Erehwon is in the bottom 10%.
- When it comes to changes in patron visits, Erehwon did better than 65% of libraries in this size range, with 19% doing significantly better.
- Only 16% of libraries in this size range had more reference transactions; 68% had significantly fewer. Erehwon is in the top quarter for libraries in its spending category, but not in the top 10%.
- 47% of libraries in this size range showed either an increase or less decrease in reference per capita; 32% showed significantly more decrease.
- For program attendance per capita, 57% of libraries in this size range did significantly better and 30% worse; Erehwon is in the bottom quarter (but not the bottom 10%) for its spending category.
- Roughly one-third (32%) of similarly-sized libraries showed more growth in program attendance, while 49% did worse. Erehwon is

in the third quarter for its spending category—more than half did worse, but more than a quarter did better.

- More than three out of five libraries of this size range (62%) had significantly more PC use per capita, and the library is in the first quarter for its spending category (that is, more than 75% did better). Only 14% showed significantly more improvement, however, with 68% doing worse.
- Finally, 56% of libraries in this size range are significantly busier, and Erehwon is in the least busy 10% for its spending category. But only 17% are getting busier at a significantly faster rate, while 66% are doing less.

Comparisons to Other Alabama Libraries

So how does Erehwon Community Library stack up against other Alabama libraries? It's still in the middle as far as size is concerned—39% of Alabama's libraries serve smaller groups while 38% serve larger groups. On the other hand, it spends more per capita than most Alabama libraries—only 13% spend significantly more while 76% spend substantially less. 24% of Alabama's libraries improved spending more than Erehwon, and 61% didn't do as well. As to the smaller set of metrics for state comparisons:

- Less than a quarter of Alabama's libraries circulated significantly more items per capita (24%), and 67% circulated fewer. For its spending category, however, Erehwon was in the lowest quartile. More than three-quarters (76%) either gained circulation or lost less. (Alabama's libraries show *very* strong correlation between spending and circulation.)
- Visits per capita are similar: 24% of Alabama's libraries had significantly more, 51% fewer. In this case, Erehwon's actually in the lowest 10% for libraries spending similar amounts. Only 22% had more improvement in visits per capita; 62% had less.
- Some 22% of Alabama's libraries had more reference transactions per capita; 67% had fewer. For its spending category, Erehwon is in the third quartile—better than half the libraries but not as good as the top quarter. A full 58% of libraries showed more improvement (or less reduction) in reference transactions per capita; 27% did worse.
- Finally, just over half (52%) of Alabama libraries had more PC use per capita, while 20% had less; for its spending category, however, Erehwon was in the bottom quartile. On the other hand, while 36% of Alabama's libraries saw even more increase in PC use per capita,

55% did worse—and Erehwon is in the top quartile for this measure in its spending category.

Are these facts helpful? Again, I'm not sure. In any case, barring a major and fairly rapid increase in sales of Volume 1 and *Your Library Is...*, Volume 2 won't appear.

Understanding Your Story

I've thought of the books as providing help to libraries attempting to tell their stories to funding agencies, once they've fleshed out data comparisons with the real-world items that make libraries special. But maybe there's another aspect: Understanding your own story.

Looking at this off-the-cuff mythical example, I wonder why the usage numbers are (except for reference) not very good. Once a library knows that their resources are being underutilized, does that help them plan ways to improve the situation?

I looked at more numbers (again averaging two real libraries to create a mythical library). Erehwon spent \$3.73 per capita on print materials in 2011: That's a reasonably healthy amount, above the national average. The library's open reasonably good hours for a small library (2,566—about 49 hours a week). There are 4.8 books per capita, which is also decent—and with 34,000 volumes, it shouldn't be that there's nothing worth borrowing. About 61% of the potential patrons are registered borrowers—which isn't great, but isn't terrible either. I do note that there aren't many programs (86 total), and most of those programs are for kids or young adults (only 15 are for adults). Is that an issue?

So: Does all of this help, or is it just a distraction? I don't know the answers.

Words

The Ebook Marketplace

[Earlier this year](#) (April 2013), I offered the optimistic suggestion that this might be “the year of both,” the year in which sensible people and pundits recognize that both print books and ebooks have substantial roles going forward.

I was uncertain enough of that in April to put a question mark after the essay title. And it wasn't really an essay; it was just a few words in THE FRONT, followed by a deathwatch essay and a death-of-books essay. But I think it may have been a good call.

You're not going to get my own philosophy (to overdramatize my thoughts) on ebooks and print books and the publishing field this time around. You can go back to the [April 2011](#) and [September 2011](#) *Cites & Insights* if that's what you're after, and I'm not ready to do a major update on those thoughts. I stand by most of them, I think. (In any case, who

would or should care?) The *very* short version: I don't think print books are going away. I don't think ebooks are a fad. I have no idea what the eventual balance between the two will be, but it seems pretty clear that many (*not all*) ebook readers and ereader owners are also avid print book readers. I doubt that a large percentage of books will become "enhanced" books. And I now own what's either an ebook reader or a tablet, depending on your definitions—but I still mostly read print books. Borrowed from my public library.

It's been some years since I've tried to put together notes on the ebook marketplace (including readers). That's what this is: Not a coherent overview, but notes based on items I've gathered over the past four years, deliberately omitting ebooks-versus (or "and")-pbooks and ebooks in libraries. This may be a helter-skelter arrangement, but you may find it worthwhile.

Those who've followed my stuff (both of you!) may note that I'm including a couple of sources I've mostly been treating as useless—but I'm also excluding some folks because they seem, on reflection, to be Big Hat No Cattle types, self-identified Industry Experts. They're right once in a while, of course, but so is a stopped clock.

Devices

After many years of dedicated ebook readers that failed miserably in the marketplace (frequently, I suspect, because the assumed definition of "adequate" resolution was nowhere near adequate enough), there are now ebook readers that really are good enough—at least for those who find them good enough. The best, at least from a resolution viewpoint, aren't *dedicated* ebook readers—they're multifunction tablets such as the iPad Retina and Kindle Fire HD models. A lot has happened over the past few years. Some notes on what has—and hasn't—happened in the device area.

Since one issue with dedicated readers seems to be a significant decline in sales in 2012 (and probably beyond), and given the possible reasons suggested for that decline, I'll add a bit of personal insight—which is *not data*, but may be relevant—that was reinforced just as I was writing this, in late September 2013. To wit:

We own a Kindle Fire HD 8.9. We purchased it to read the San Francisco *Chronicle*, saving \$44/month on our subscription in the process. Since we purchased it on a one-day sale last fall, it paid for itself in six months.

This week (as I write this), Amazon announced the Kindle Fire HDX, which has a 9" version. It's supposedly much faster, has much higher resolution, is lighter and has better colors. Oh, and a rear-facing camera. If we purchased one, it would pay for itself in eight or nine months.

We won't be purchasing one. Because the Kindle Fire HD 8.9 is more than good enough for our needs—and to us, at least, the Kindle isn't an object of desire and obsession, the way iPhones and iPads seem to be for some (clearly not all) users. We see no need to rush out and buy Better, when what we have is Good Enough. Because we don't spend hours and hours Kindling; we use it as a reader. I suspect the latter—"it's a support device for what we're really doing, not a destination"—is true for many (maybe most) ereader owners. If that's true, then sales *will* slow as the market is saturated—and the market for ereaders is not "every book reader" but some subset of active readers.

E-Book Reader With Roll-Out Screen Stalls

That title could have appeared almost any time and still be appropriate, as one "this is the way everything will be, real soon now" dream continues to elude mass production and marketability. This time, it was from Priya Ganapati [on April 20, 2009](#) at *Wired's* Gadget Lab, and the device was Radius from Polymer Vision.

Polymer Vision's Radius is set to be the first pocket e-book reader with a roll-up display bigger than the device itself. There's just one catch: The device isn't out yet and the company, which has blown past its predicted launch date, is looking to refinance itself and raise new funding.

The company is a "spin-off" of Philips (incorrectly spelled in the item, but hey, the company's only been around for 122 years; I'm sure *Wired* will learn its real name eventually). One wonders why, if the device was such a great idea, Philips spun it off...

Anyway: all the demos showed a device that would fit in your back pocket but and roll out into a 5" e-ink display, "making it easy to read without sacrificing portability." So a 5" display is big enough or optimal?

The honcho for the company was as assured of huge success as every other hot new product maker:

"Our concept is phenomenal," says McGoldrick. "People look at rollable displays as something in the future but it's here and we have it."

Four years later? I wonder how many people even care about rollable displays. Wikipedia says "Polymer Vision designed and manufactured a 6-inch screen that displays black and white e-ink text and images at 800×600 pixels and can roll around a tube the circumference of a dime" in May 2011, two years after this piece. It was still called the Radius. So, following the link from the footnote for the Radius, we get to [Radius.com](#).

Which has a pretty picture of *The New York Times* with a cup of coffee next to it and an ereader on top of it, the ereader being...an older Kindle, one with a physical keyboard. The text, however, explains it all:

Phasellus tincidunt ultricies tellus, sit amet dictum ante adipiscing non. Nulla eu metus in lorem porta auctor non in sem. Vivamus nisl magna, mollis non blandit a, placerat ut ipsum.

If that isn't clear enough, here's Google Translate's translation from what it senses as Latin:

More Products you need, be sure has been said before the surgery, it does not. No Illegal trade in vehicle gate author not on television. We live in a civilization, not soft by scientists to get to him.

So the best that can be said of RADIUS at this point is that we live in a civilization, not soft by scientists to get to him. Perhaps inscribed on a roll-out reader.

Binging "RADIUS" yields an odd variety of results. There's a July 20, 2009 *cnet* story saying the maker of the RADIUS has reportedly gone out of business. There's one "ezinearticles.com" dated January 5, 2010 that says it "almost didn't happen"—but since the site itself seems to be unreachable, that's all I can tell you. [Here's one by Matthew Miller](#) at *ZDNet* that gives his impressions after actually using a RADIUS, saying he was impressed enough that he'll have to import one from Europe when it's introduced in the last half of this year—but "this year" was 2008, so this may be primarily interesting because Miller says he's going to skip the Kindle—because this device is so much better. The Kindle of 2008 suffered from many drawbacks, being an actual product rather than a prototype possibly one of them.

The best link is probably [this one](#): "Posts tagged RADIUS" at *engadget*. Key headlines: July 18, 2009: Polymer Vision yields to bankruptcy...; October 29, 2009: Polymer Vision gets new lease on life thanks to Wistron; November 12, 2009: Wistron: RADIUS-like ereader with pull-out flexible display launching in 2010; December 3, 2012: Polymer Vision reportedly shut down, along with its dream of rollable e-ink displays. Between the renewed promise of November 2009 and the complete shutdown of December 2012? Nada.

Why give this sad story so much space? Because the reportage is so typical, treating a prototype as though it's production-ready (and judging production, um, products against prototypes) even though the company behind it has no track record.

The e-book wars of 2010: displays and hardware

This [January 8, 2010 piece](#) by Jon Stokes at *ars technica* is of necessity somewhat predictive, since it appeared in January 2010, not December. Here's the opening paragraph:

If I had any doubts that the e-book wars are officially on, my first day at CES dispelled them thoroughly. Note that I said “e-book wars,” and not “e-reader wars.” That’s because there’s a tidal wave of E-Ink-based e-readers that are about to hit the US, so that by the second half of this year (at the latest) E-Ink screens will be a dime a dozen. And on top of the E-Ink screens will be the tablets, and on top of those will be LCD/E-Ink tablet combos in various configurations.

But he also says, “Everyone also wants to control a distribution platform.” This article was the first in a multipart series; it’s devoted to readers. Some highlights of the great products of 2010:

- The Sprint/Hearst Skiff and the Plastic Logic QUE. The Skiff? 11.5” diagonal. The QUE was a little smaller. Both used flexible display substrates, which were clearly going to knock everything else off the market. Just as soon as they reached the market in serious quantity. Which, for some reason, *still hasn’t happened*. Hearst sold Skiff to NewsCorp. There’s a website...consisting of [a 2010 press release](#) announcing the sale. As for Plastic Logic, after close to a decade of announcing hot new flexible display devices, then canceling them before they reached market, the still existent (apparently) company now says it will license its technology to other companies. The QUE went south in August 2010; a year later, the company announced the Plastic Logic 100 to bring e-textbooks to Russian schools...and that didn’t happen either. Oh, there was even a color E-ink prototype from Skiff...
- There’s Qualcomm’s Mirasol as a direct competitor to E-ink, but with color. The writer thought it might be promising if they made it work better, since what Qualcomm showed had low resolution, unsaturated color (that is, very pastel) and an “old-timey lithograph” look.
- Remember the Entourage Edge, a huge device that folds out to show a full-page LCD screen on one side and an E-ink page on the other? MSI had one of these too. For that matter, for a while B&N marketed a Nook combining a small LCD screen and a large E-ink screen. (It’s long gone, as far as I can tell.) Ah, and then there’s OLED...but not quite yet.

Stokes concluded that dedicated devices would inevitably and soon be relegated “to the boneyard of low-end, discount obsolescence.” Maybe. Mostly, Stokes was *certain* that e-readers would be “commodities by the second quarter of this year”—that is, by June 2010. Did that happen? It may depend on how you define “commodity.”

5 Things That Will Make E-Readers Better in 2010

Traditionally, you don’t begin a sentence—not even a headline—with a number; you spell it out. But using the number makes it even clearer that you’re dealing with a listicle, a piece made up of bite-size numbered

segments. And (some) people just *love* listicles. Besides, they're much easier to do than actual journalism. So here's Priya Ganapati's [February 17, 2010 piece](#) at *Wired's* Gadget Lab.

The five technologies?

- Touch. Specifically *good* touch-sensitive screens, ones that respond smoothly and don't screw up the display itself.
- Color. "If there's one thing that most e-reader enthusiasts want from the next generation of devices, it is color." I'm still not sure I see that as important for most books, but hey...
- Flexibility. Ooh, ooh, we're all gonna have flexible displays! Specifically, metal foil-based flexible displays: "Instead of a layer of glass (which is at the foundation of most displays available currently) the next generation of e-readers will have lightweight screens that are based on a metal foil."
- Better software. Because readers want an "interactive experience" to make bookreading interesting.
- More contrast. E-ink's early screens had crappy contrast. Later ones were somewhat better.

How did this play out? I'd say about half-and-half: dead wrong on flexible displays, pretty much irrelevant on better software (almost all ebooks are still linear text because, you know, *it works* for some things), and I believe there are millions of non-color e-Ink readers still being sold. But touch seems pretty common and most readers offer pretty good contrast.

I notice something missing, apparently because Ganapati didn't think it mattered or because nobody pushed it: Resolution close to that of a printed page, that is, at least 230-250ppi. If Kindle didn't offer that, we'd have waited until we could convince ourselves to buy an iPad Retina.

Speaking of listicles...

When I stopped writing about ebooks with any regularity, I also lost track of *Kindle Review*, a website run by "switch11" that is 100% pro ebook and 95% pro-Kindle. Here's "Top 50 eReader + eBook Trends for 2010," [dated March 5, 2010](#), divided into a Top 10 covering both, then more sets. You may find it interesting to see what appeared certain. For example, flexible, unbreakable e-Ink readers were a dead certainty—and publishing was going to be *transformed* in 2010. "switch11" regards publishers as "leeches" and says new middlemen may replace the existing "leeches."

Some things weren't treated as certain—for example, the free Kindle with your Amazon Prime membership and possibly being rid of DRM. "switch11" thinks dual displays (LCD and e-Ink) are great. *Unquestionably* there would be color e-Ink (not LCD) readers by the end of 2010; it just wasn't clear which technology would win.

E-Readers Will Survive the Onslaught of Tablets

That's Priya Ganapati at *Wired's* Gadget Lab [on March 12, 2010](#), and maybe the first paragraph is all that needs to be said:

If you think the coming wave of tablets is about to make e-book readers obsolete, guess again.

I'd forgotten some of the “dozens of tablets” that hit the market in 2010—JooJoo?—but “executives in the e-reader industry” didn't find them as worrisome as some might assume. Robert Brunner (founder of the design firm that worked on the Nook) seems to get it right: “In the short term, every company is likely to have two lines of products”—that is, an e-Ink reader and something that's more like a tablet. If “every company” means every *ereader* company, that may be right, but I haven't seen Apple or Dell or HP putting out e-Ink products. For that matter, this assumption may be partly off:

In the digital world, [the equivalent of hardback-vs-paperback]'s likely to translate into two sets of products: Full-featured tablets with color displays and lots of features that cost \$400 or more, and inexpensive black-and-white E Ink-powered e-readers that will be available for \$150 or less.

I'm not sure what “full-featured” means; do the Nook HD and Kindle Fire HD count? Neither one is anywhere *close* to \$400, but that's a couple of years later. I'd forgotten just how old the Kindle actually is—the first one came out in 2007.

Ganapati is certainly right about “chatter that tablets could mean the end of the road for e-readers.” I heard that as a flat prediction from at least one library guru a few years ago, and certainly from many gurus in the tech field.

There's more here; it's an interesting article, one that holds up remarkably well in 2013.

A skeptic gets a Kindle

This one—by Meredith Farkas [on June 6, 2010](#) at *Information Wants To Be Free*—is a little different: One (knowledgeable librarian) person's thoughts after using a Kindle that she won rather than purchased. Farkas at the time may have been even more of an online-reading skeptic than I was:

Heck, I hate reading articles on my computer! I've printed out every article assigned for ACRL Immersion because there's no way I'll retain anything if I read it at my computer. And even if I did want to read eBooks, I'd never want to do it on a device that only does that—like I need another electronic thing to lug around.

But she won the Kindle at a conference raffle and decided to try it out—and “To my surprise, I actually found it to be just as pleasant as reading a

print book.” She finds that she’s reading more now than she had been since her son was born.

Knowing what I know now, would I have bought it? Probably not. I don’t travel enough (or read enough, with a toddler in the house) to make it really worthwhile. But there are other reasons why I think the Kindle, and eBook readers like it, are not where it’s at. First of all, while you can annotate a book, it’s extremely cumbersome on a Kindle. When I was in college, I highlighted and underlined the hell out of my books and wrote notes in the margins. When I thought about transferring my Immersion readings to the Kindle, I rejected the idea because I knew I’d want to write notes in the margins and underline important passages and it seemed like a hassle to do that on the Kindle and then refer back to those annotations at Immersion.

Farkas also finds social aspects of book reading important and still wants a “convergence device” rather than a pure ereader. Mostly, she believed that what came out in the years after 2010 was likely to “put what’s available right now to shame.”

Mostly here as a data point from a thoughtful writer and librarian.

Kindle’s fate

Gene Golovchinsky’s [June 7, 2010 item](#) at *FXPAL Blog* is worth noting if only because he was so certain—and so wrong. To wit:

Last week I made a handshake bet that Amazon will stop selling the Kindle device in a year’s time. Today I am putting it in writing. Amazon will stop selling its devices for several reasons: because the margins are higher on books, because ultimately people won’t want to have multiple, specialized devices with significantly-overlapping functions, and because the devices themselves are quite limited.

The post expands those points. It includes the interesting assertion that when his company ran focus groups among executives, *nobody* was interested in a dedicated “reading/note-taking device.” Of course, e-Ink Kindles are *terrible* note-taking devices, but never mind: Clearly, dedicated devices were doomed! The story is clear: Amazon had no business in the hardware marketplace and would have the good sense to exit it by June 7, 2011.

Don’t hold your breath for color E-Ink readers

What? That must be some crank site! Didn’t all the experts assure us in 2009 and early 2010 that color E-ink readers were just around the corner? Then what’s Jon Stokes doing writing [this on November 9, 2010](#) at *ars technica*?

Bringing a refreshing note of reality to the promises, that’s what. The story ran after [a New York Times article](#) touting a new color E-ink reader

and “every tech site in the world” linked to the story. The company planning to introduce the reader was Hanvon and a 9.7” color reader was promised by March 2011 for \$440—in China. The company CEO said they might sell it in the US as well. The company still has a website and does list a 9.7” color e-Ink reader—but I can find nothing to suggest that it was ever actually released.

Stokes is saying it wouldn’t matter much if Hanvon *did* release the reader in the US: “The reason is that it just doesn’t look very good, so there won’t be much of a market for it or a reason for anyone else to jump in with a competing design.” Why? Because color e-Ink, at least back then, just doesn’t *look* very good—and most assuredly the promotional pictures of Hanvon’s product (on its own website) look terrible, with faded color that barely deserves the name.

What’s the point of color in an ebook reader? Primarily, I would think, to support children’s books, art books, picture books, comic books and magazines. For any of those to work, you need reasonably bright, high-resolution color. That apparently was a lot more than color e-Ink could offer then. Or now? (Interesting that some comments suggested that Stokes was a hater and hoped he didn’t mind the taste of crow. I doubt he’s eaten much crow over this story.) Best guess: improvements in backlighting, battery life and resolution made devices like the Nook HD and Kindle Fire HD *so* attractive that color e-Ink didn’t have much of a chance.

It ain’t heavy, it’s my e-reader

The rest of the title of [this December 16, 2010](#) *ars technica* piece by Nate Anderson: “a review of the Nook Color.” The official name was NOOKcolor, but Anderson called that “absurd abuse of the alphabet.” Beyond that, he began by reviewing the packaging—and, given my reaction when we opened the box in which our Kindle Fire HD 8.9 was shipped, that makes sense. Really great packaging gives you a good first impression. The Nook was well packaged (no hard plastic shrinkwrap, no fighting with the packaging), as was the Kindle. (Based on Anderson’s review, the Nook was better: he loved the “gloriously over-engineered box.” The Kindle box did require tearing an opening strip on a sleek black box—not nearly as fancy as embedded magnets to hold a box opened or closed!)

When it was introduced, the 7” Nook color was a real bargain at \$249—Anderson said it was the best deal available at the time for a *good* 7” Android tablet. The flaws? “Heavy in the hand”—about 15oz., much lighter than an iPad but 50% heavier than a Kindle 3. But it’s heavier and bulkier because it’s a fast color tablet with a good touchscreen. This was late 2010: it wasn’t a *high definition* color screen (600x1024, 169 ppi), but it was good for the time.

Much, maybe too much, of the review consists of comparisons with the Kindle 3 (*not* a touchscreen, grayscale only); as you'd expect, the Nook color does very well on these comparisons.

As for being an Android tablet, Anderson says it's "locked down hard." B&N didn't want to sell general-purpose Android tablets; it wanted to sell ebook devices with extra features. Still, not only was Pandora already installed, so was Quickoffice, which can read most Office documents.

All in all, a thoughtful, lengthy review of an early color ebook reader—a case where B&N beat Amazon to the marketplace.

iPad Owners Not Using the Device to Read E-books?

That question is asked in [this April 28, 2011 piece](#) at *BookBusiness* (no byline). The lede quotes a press release from Simba Information saying "Approximately 40 percent of iPad owners 'have not used the device to read a single e-book.'" The press release apparently suggests that iPads are used for games and other media rather than ebooks. (One could suggest web browsing, useful apps, lots of other things, but never mind.)

My first reaction is the same as that of the writer, as stated in the second paragraph:

One could wonder why the 40 percent not using the device to read e-books is being stressed, when the higher number, 60 percent—by the process of deduction—have used the device to read at least one e-book. Is that number not significant?

There's a response of sorts from a Simba analyst, but I'm not sure it makes sense. The analyst says there are 100 million Americans who don't buy books "and we're screwing ourselves if we don't sell the activity of reading to them." (Apparently borrowing books from libraries wouldn't count as reading.)

Not sure this matters much: The PR is mostly to sell Simba's modestly priced report on trade ebook publishing and consumption—a mere \$3,250 as a download or \$3,450 in hardcopy. I have not, I hasten to add, read the report. That some people who own iPads might *also* own Kindles or other dedicated ereaders and prefer to read books on them...well, that's just silly talk. Or reality, if you prefer.

iBooks vs. Kindle vs. Google Books for iPad Reading

Let's take this one step further: if you *do* plan to do your ebook reading on your iPad, how should you acquire those ebooks? Alexis C. Madrigal apparently gets paid to tell us every detail of his iPad love affair, as here in [a May 26, 2011 item](#) at *The Atlantic*. Madrigal really likes reading books on the iPad ("really like" is his exact wording) but isn't sure what platform he should use.

He's biased toward Google Books and the Kindle app because he's used both and likes the cross-device support—but iBooks has “consonance with other Apple-designed products.” Once you're in the iClutches, there's no escaping? Anyway, he asked his Twitter followers—and includes their answers.

Summing up, Kindle is the best and least risky because you can read books on almost any device, there's a huge selection, you may be able to lend your books and the Kindle platform offers highlights and notes. iBook adherents mostly point to aesthetics—but Charlie Sorrel thinks the Kindle app wins here. Notably, iBooks do *not* offer cross-platform support. Google Books didn't get a lot of takers if you're paying—but people love the freebies. One exception: A person who prefers to buy from independent bookstores such as Powell's and can do so via Google Books.

Here's an interesting one I would *not* have expected: some people try to get their books as PDFs rather than through ebook platforms—and Madrigal also prefers PDFs. (Given the way I produce ebooks and the “online version” of this here ejournal, which should read beautifully on any 8”-10” tablet, that's heartening.)

The conclusion? Multiple platforms depending on what's available where and when.

Reading through the tweets, I see that two of the dozen or so respondents weren't just saying that their preferred method of buying books for the iPad was the Kindle platform: They were saying that they owned iPads but preferred to read books on this other device they also owned: A Kindle. (A couple of others thought they'd probably buy them.) And there was this one, which I'm sure Apple loved: “my iPad came with iBooks. Decision made.”

Are Tablets Killing E-Readers? Um, No...

Every proper deathwatch-oriented single-future guru *knows* that everybody will buy multipurpose tablets rather than single-purpose e-readers! Thus, this piece by John C. Abell [on June 28, 2011](#) at *Wired* is probably fiction. Right?

Or not. There's a big graph at the opening. The graph shows e-reader ownership among adults growing sharply from about 6% in November 2010 to 12% in May 2011, while tablet ownership grew from 5% in November 2010 to 8% in May 2011. The story seems to be that tablet ownership was leveling off while e-readers were taking off.

Why is an appliance that costs about \$140 trumping a mobile internet computer does a thousand more things, albeit it 3-4 times the price? Perhaps because the hardware nearly disappears and the experience of using one more closely resembles the analog reading experience.

[Copied-and-pasted without modification.] The short piece says, “For now, it seems those factors will push even further into the future their inevitable obsolescence...”

What none of the commenters noticed: The *stated* margin of error in the survey, even assuming Pew Internet did everything right, was +/- 2%. Which means that 12% and 8% could both represent the *same* real-world results.

Reading habits and the Kindle

It's a brief piece and not too serious, and it's only indirectly about ebook devices, but I couldn't resist: [September 21, 2011](#), on the Prospero blog at *The Economist*, with this alternate title: “Too many books.”

The writer presumes (correctly, I believe) that lots of people read more than one book at a time (I'm typically working on three magazines and one book on any given day, with *The Economist* usually one of the three—does that count?). You know: the bathroom books, the commute books, the novels you can only manage a few pages at a time...

The blogger loves the fact that a Kindle can contain “many fat books...within one slim device.” But he finds that he's buying more books...and becoming less likely to complete any of them, “given how easy the device makes it to switch from one book to another.”

In all, the blogger finds that rather than working on two or three books at a time, it's now six or seven. “And the feeling of guilt only builds; will I ever finish any of them?”

The comments are a truly odd lot, including some who think the problem is the blogger's unwillingness to simply *stop reading* poor books. I didn't get that at all. (There are also the finger-shakers: those who only read *one book at a time*, start to finish, the way Gaia intended. Preferably in a single sitting.) Included here because it's amusing, not because it's a Serious Problem.

About the Merit of an e-Reader as a Single-Purpose Device

This essay is by Bohyun Kim, [posted January 22, 2012](#) at *Library Hat*, and it's interesting because Kim is one of those who *owns* an iPad and couldn't see the point of a single-purpose device. In Kim's own words:

I figured since I have an iPad, it would be completely pointless to own and use a e-book reader, which I understood mostly as a single-purpose device.

Then Kim borrowed a library Kindle and “this conviction was completely swept away.” The library checks out Kindles preloaded with selected ebooks. In this case, Kim decided to read *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

To my surprise, I found myself enjoying the library e-reader way more than I expected.

I loved the much lighter weight and the much less eye-straining screen of a Kindle (compared to my first-generation iPad). *But what I loved most about this e-reader was actually its limitation. The fact that I can do nothing but reading.*

[Emphasis modified: in the post, those sentences appear in purple type.]

Kim typically had trouble *concentrating* on reading on the iPad because there were so many distractions—email, web surfing, tweets, Facebook updates.

On the other hand, on this single-purpose device, it was easy to continue reading for a much longer time. Sometimes, I would have an urge to go online and do something else. But often I would just ignore the urge as I simply didn't feel like moving.

To the dismay of some pundits, digital cameras *that only take pictures and maybe movies* are still selling by the tens of millions, even though some modern smartphones and tablets have pretty good digital cameras built-in. Why would anybody want a single-purpose device when a multipurpose device is available?

The traditional answers (from those of us who don't see single paths) include "Because the dedicated device does it better" and "Because the dedicated device is cheaper." Here's another one: Because the dedicated device is *dedicated*, therefore reducing distractions.

5 Ways Ereaders Are Still Better Than Tablets

I know, I know, it's a listicle—and, worse yet, it's from *Gizmodo* ([on December 21, 2012](#) by Brian Barrett). But it still may have something to offer, if you add the automatic "for some people in some situations" to the headline.

Of course the piece begins with a deathwatch: "The Age of the Ereader is drawing to a close." I wasn't aware there ever was an Age of the Ereader, although there's a link to an article showing that ereader shipments did fall considerably in 2012—not back to 2010 levels, to be sure. (This makes sense: For many, perhaps most, people who want ebook readers, once you own one, you're done: They're not like smartphones, where you *must* buy a new one every year or two unless you're a mangy, worthless dog.)

There's a weakness with the article and most similar articles: It lacks a clear definition of what's a tablet and what's an ereader. So, for example, which is a Kindle DX? What about a Kindle Fire HD 8.9? Do I own an ereader (my opinion) or a tablet (probably what most market-analysis folks would say)?

Here's *Gizmodo's* Big Five:

- Ereaders are cheap. That is, decent ereaders are cheaper than *decent* tablets. (Some commenters point out an odd bit in this discussion, which I'd just skipped over: After noting that a Kibo

Mini goes for \$50, the writer says, “You can pay more than that for an oil change.” To which more than one person says, reasonably, *where the hell do you get your oil changed?* Of course, you *can* pay more than almost any price for almost anything, if you’re determined...

- They’re immersive—they lack the distractions that tablets provide. (I find this a remarkably poor argument, given that good book reading apps are full-screen, but maybe I’m not as prone to seeking out distractions as some people.)
- They’re easy on the eyes—and the expansion there is a little overdone, especially since it praises e-ink so much and says LCD displays will “surely strain your eyes.”
- They’re adaptable (specifically those with front lighting).
- They’ll last—in other words, you won’t feel the need to buy one in another year or three. Which, of course, results in rapid market saturation, thus falling shipments, thus...

As commenters point out, battery life is also a strength of pure e-ink readers. They’re pretty good comments, by and large: More than one person notes that the fifth bullet—once you own one, you don’t need another one—may explain the decline in sales. There are also the usual idiots, e.g., the person saying the main reason for ereader declines is “that fewer and fewer young people read at all.”

The coming eReader apocalypse

Let’s balance out the preceding discussion with a good hearty deathwatch, this one from Jason Perlow [on December 21, 2012](#) at ZDNet. The summary: “The Kindle and the NOOK may still be selling like hotcakes this holiday season, but doom is on the horizon.”

Apocalypse! Doom! Turns out Perlow’s been predicting The Death of Ereaders for some time now—primarily because the marketplace is so competitive that manufacturers are essentially making no profit on them. (That’s partly because Amazon admittedly sells Kindles at cost.)

Ah, but B&N and Amazon have both diversified into tablets, and “clearly” (Perlow scatters “clearly” and “obviously” frequently throughout his argument, because—I dunno—it helps make it obvious that he *must be right?*) they’ll soon give up on ereaders and focus on tablets.

Perlow (who works for Microsoft) regards the Kindle Fire as a tablet. He figures dedicated ereaders will disappear entirely as soon as 7” tablet prices drop to \$99 (it’s happened, but the tablet’s from Craig) and also figures that, unlike tablets, there’s no way to reduce the production cost of ereaders, therefore... Oh, and since “most consumers” prefer multipurpose devices if the price is the same, therefore...

He seems to be saying that it *doesn’t matter* if “only 10 or 20 percent” of consumers want dedicated e-readers: That’s not enough to make them

worthwhile. Which, of course, explains why Apple, which never achieved more than about 7% penetration of the PC marketplace, went under years ago. Right? Because 20% of a marketplace is too small a chunk to be worth noticing.

A bizarre little piece. The comments I did read mostly disagreed.

Let's Be Honest—I Hate Nook

This is very much a library-related item, but certainly worth noting—by Daniel Messer [on February 27, 2013](#) at *Not All Bits*. The heart of it: he's been doing a lot of ereader training classes at library branches—and finds that he can get people set up for library ebooks pretty quickly. Except...

In all of that, one set of devices stood above the mad crowds of tech in terms of bad usability, lousy user experience, platform instability, and being generally harder to use than anything else.

Nooks.

The details? You'll have to read the piece.

I got a Kindle

Jessamyn West posted this [on February 16, 2013](#) at *librarian.net*. Admitting to being “dreadfully behind the times,” she finally saw the Kindle she wanted at a price point she thought was worthwhile: a Kindle Keyboard 3G/Wifi model. She got a refurb for \$50 including delivery—mostly because of the Kindle Fire, Paperwhite and other newer models driving down older prices.

Here's one that resonates with me, except that I don't seem to be traveling:

I am mostly interested in using this when I travel for the free worldwide-ish internet access as well as being able to carry a lot of books with me on a long trip...

There's more—and that includes hacking the Kindle and finding ways to get ebooks without involving Amazon. It also includes a discussion involving West's casual attitudes about copyright; since my mileage *does* vary, I'll avoid discussing that.

She likes the Kindle as a reader. She doesn't like DRM, the ebook-and-library situation, etc. An interesting discussion followed by some interesting comments.

If the Kindle fails so will ebooks

So saith Baldur Bjarnason [in this July 18, 2013 item](#) at *Studio Tendra*, and that title was striking enough to make me tag the article. Baldur's an author, and he sees it as ludicrous to criticize authors who link to Amazon pages for their books.

What I don't understand is what do people expect us to do?

Even if every publisher, every author, and every editor out there studiously avoided sending traffic to Amazon in any way, that wouldn't even cause a measurable dent in Amazon's book or ebook revenue.

People go to Amazon, they aren't sent there.

Pointing people anywhere else will only result in lower affiliate fees for the author or publisher as people follow the link, close the tab, and then go to Amazon directly to buy it there anyway.

An interesting and disturbing thought ("I for one welcome my Amazonian overlords"), but he's mostly saying "the fate of ebooks is intertwined with the fate of the Kindle." He offers a number of ways that other people could beat the Kindle and Amazon, but says "The problem is that ebooks *are* the Kindle and Amazon as far as most buyers are concerned." Is that true?

He is also certain that, if current ebook sales were split evenly among the five big contentders (he says Amazon, Kobo, B&N, Apple and Google) Amazon would have taken over at least 60% of the marketplace within two years.

Why? Because it would build on its ecommerce expertise in general (they don't just do ebooks), because it has better customer service than the others, and because it would have lower prices. Amazon will *always* have lower prices because it is willing to aggressively give up revenue to do so and its executives passionately believe that it's the right tactic for them. Other companies don't have the guts to match it completely.

"And I will *always* be loyal to my Amazonian overlords, for they are the best overlords there could possibly be."

Competition

Amazon dominated full-length ebook sales pretty much ever since the Kindle emerged. It's still the biggest player. But it's not the only player, and over time various analysts have had much to say about the state of competition.

As the EBook Market Matures, Amazon Will Face Stiff Competition

Personally, I would have said that the book market started maturing in 2012, when ebook sales growth started slowing and people started recognizing that print books aren't going away—but [this piece](#), by Frederick Lardinois at *ReadWriteWeb*, is dated August 3, 2009.

It's pretty good, citing a Forrester research report that discusses the next wave of ebook adopters (those who weren't true early adopters) and how Amazon might get more competition. As you'd expect, there are missteps (e.g., the assumption that eReader manufacturers would *only*

offer devices that do nothing but display ebooks) but also on-point items (e.g., the argument that you'd need to get one-function devices below \$100 to keep them salable—and look at the current price points for some one-function ereaders!).

Lardinois' commentary is also good, especially given the date. I won't quote more of it, but he offers some useful reasoning as to why Amazon might *keep* its lead.

Amazon's Kindle winning battle, but Adobe poised to win e-book war

Doesn't this belong in the Devices section? Not really—because the [December 9, 2009](#) Eric Lai article at *Computerworld* pits software against hardware in a “war” that probably never really existed. Apparently, Adobe was pitching the idea that because more than 100 publishers, book retailers and libraries used Adobe Content Server, the Kindle was on its way out.

Huh?

First, including “and libraries” in the count—which means any library adopting Overdrive early on was counted as an Adobe partner—is a little silly. The realistic comparison comes further down in the article: 17 “e-book reader manufacturers” licensed Adobe software to enable their readers to display PDF and ePub ebooks. (Didn't know there *were* 17 e-book reader manufacturers? Don't think there are? In 2013, there may not be, depending on your definition.)

It's an interesting article, typical of why I always found *Computerworld* (which I read for many years in the distant past) a little confusing: The same paragraph says PDF and ePub are “open industry standards”—but the Adobe-enforced DRM is not. Thus, these formats via Adobe servers are closed-open, an oxymoronic state.

The *really* bad assumption is that Amazon would always support only AZW on the Kindle, which was already false when the article appeared. There's also at least one questionable assumption:

Nook users will be able to buy e-books from stores other than Barnes & Noble; they will also be able to transfer e-books back and forth to a computer or other e-book reader, such as a Sony Reader, without fear of hiccups.

As long as DRM is involved, “without fear of hiccups” is nonsense. (That's as true for Amazon as for anybody else.) An Adobe person called the Kindle a “closed approach,” which was clearly wrong, as Amazon pointed out. And it's hard to fault this statement from Amazon: “our thoughts on ePub are that ePub isn't open if you wrap DRM around it.”

Why was Adobe beating up on Amazon? Most likely because Amazon's ebook store didn't and doesn't use (and pay for) Adobe's content server. So Adobe felt it necessary to point out that hot new fast color high-resolution devices from other companies would be much better for ebooks

than “today’s Kindle with its slow, monochrome screen.” Too bad Amazon would never come up with something with high resolution, color and good speed, and maybe even a bigger screen. They could call such a mythical device the Kindle Fire HD 8.9 if they didn’t have a *good* name for it. But no, as Adobe could predict, Amazon would just keep peddling the first-generation Kindle.

Streaming or Buying Books: Will Readers Choose a Subscription Model for E-Books?

Another aspect of competition, to be sure. This one’s by Audrey Watters [on April 10, 2011](#) at *ReadWriteWeb*. The article recounts a discussion among the staff about subscription models as opposed to download purchases—for music, but also for books. That discussion seemed to be typically RWW in that Only One Future was likely—that is, it’s phrased as “whether or not the future of music involved downloads and ownership...or streaming and subscription.” How about both? A multiplicity of models has worked elsewhere; why wouldn’t it work for music (and for books)?

The piece mentions a Spanish startup that planned to provide a book subscription service offering either *ad-supported* or subscription-based book access. The books are in the cloud: You can stream them but you can’t download and keep them. (I’d commented on this company earlier; still around, still with a tiny selection of books for between 5€ and 9€ per month depending on how often you pay. That’s about \$6.60 to \$9.90 as of early September 2013.)

Actually, that startup is about all there is to the story. Well, except for a handful of comments, the first of which is *positive*: “Yes, yes yes yes yes”—but this person assumes *libraries* will do the subscribing and authors would love it. (There’s a disconnect here...)

Poll Technica: would you sign up for Amazon e-book subscriptions?

Jacqui Cheng asked that question [on September 12, 2011](#) at *ars technica*. There were rumors that Amazon would do something of the sort—possibly bundled with Amazon Prime, possibly separate. Mostly older books, possibly with a limit on number of books per month. (Was this the Amazon Prime lending library? I dunno. I know my Kindle ebooks are available to that library. I know my total revenue from this pay-per-loan system, with Amazon paying out, is \$0 to date. But that’s just me.)

The article says that sources didn’t know whether Amazon “would allow publishers to choose whether they want to participate.” Would Amazon have a choice in the matter? Not as long as ebook licenses seem to trump first sale rights: Nothing authorizes Amazon to lend ebooks whether publishers want them to or not.

Think of this poll as a snapshot among techies. When I checked, there were 5,255 votes—and most of them said they *would* pay for such a subscription. Also 152 comments, which I didn't attempt to go through. The third in the list, from PunditGuy, is charming:

I have a public library, but thanks.

I think that would have been my response as well. So did a number of others (but then, sigh, there's the suggestion that public libraries are going away, so...and there's an idiot who responds directly "So, you're willing to let other people fund your reading, but not willing to pay for it yourself?"—since, presumably, PunditGuy isn't a taxpayer and therefore is a freeloader? Yes, there was a fast response. Then there was another clown who seemed to equate public libraries with socialism). Actually, I was pleasantly surprised at how many of the first page (30 or so?) of comments mentioned public libraries, usually favorably.

Why the idea of a Netflix for e-books makes sense

Same Amazon possibility, same day (September 12, 2011), [different source](#): Mathew Ingram at *gigaom*. I find Ingram's discussion extremely unsatisfying, possibly because he's one of those who says "I have nothing against public libraries" as he's busily comparing public libraries to Blockbuster (with Amazon in Netflix' role). Ingram's strong on the "natural evolution of the book" and believes the inevitable transition to all ebooks also implies a natural transition to rentals rather than purchase.

To anybody who knows the book market, "A simple monthly fee tacked onto your existing Amazon account, and you get access to thousands of books" doesn't sound that great: "Thousands" is such a tiny number in the universe of books.

It's an odd article. I didn't care for it. You might love it.

Will Amazon's 'Digital Library' Kill the Physical One? Let's Hope Not

Yet another September 2011 article based on the idea of an Amazon "Netflix-like" service—this by David Zax [on September 13, 2011](#) at *Technology Review*.

Two things happened to be yesterday, seemingly unrelated. I received a package of vitamins, shipped to me from Amazon.com. And I went to the library, a few blocks from my home, where I learned that the great novelist Amitav Ghosh would soon be giving a talk, free of charge.

A third thing happened yesterday, too, something that forges a bond between the other two nonevents from my own life. The *Wall Street Journal* [reported](#) that Amazon.com was in talks to launch what the Journal called a "digital-books library." Much as Netflix currently

does with films and TV shows, or Spotify and others are doing with music, Amazon has its eye on developing an “all-you-can-eat” plan for digital books—for one annual fee, goes the thinking, readers can gorge themselves on e-books throughout the year.

Those are the first two paragraphs—and Zax notes that, “Depending on whom else you ask, the idea is fantastic or abysmal,” with publishers hating it and some commentators loving it. Zax is in the middle, even though he’s one of those who (unlike me) makes it a point to avoid real-world drugstores in favor of giving Amazon his money. “But a book is different, and the physical spaces and institutions that surround books are different.” He links with some appropriate disdain to [a Stephen Shankland piece](#) at *Cnet News* that begins with this awful lede:

Once upon a time, you might tell your children, there were buildings called libraries. A resident of a city or town, you would explain, could walk into one and borrow books--for free!

Arrgggh... and, sure enough, toward the end of a piece that’s mostly about how publishers should embrace Amazon’s idea, Shankland says this:

I have no idea how relevant libraries will remain, but certainly the Internet has somewhat undermined their utility as a community resource, and I’d say the private sector is well on its way to supplanting some of libraries’ *raison d’etre*.

Zax’ take on the first sentence (Once upon...)? “It’s a nauseating thought.” He considers the possibility of losing public libraries *much* worse than losing bookstores or Tower or Blockbuster. The close:

[A]s the e-book revolution continues to erode the physicality of books, we should ensure that it doesn’t erode, too, the physical milieus books traditionally lived in, and the crucial and uplifting services those spaces provided—lending, outreach, and the occasional talk by the likes of Amitav Ghosh, all free of charge.

I can live with “erode,” as it doesn’t suggest the full death of print books—and I can certainly live with the comment in general.

Would You Buy Ebooks on a Pay-As-You-Read Basis?

Jamie Condliffe asks that question [on February 4, 2013](#) at *Gizmodo*. It’s a little item about a Tel Aviv startup, [TotalBooX](#), that plans to “disrupt” the ebook market (Condliffe uses scare quotes) by selling books on the basis of a small fee for *each page you read*.

It’s limited to iPads and Android tablets. They give you \$3 in credits to start with; as you read a page of a book, it becomes “yours forever”—at a price. How much? That depends. When you look at book listings, you see a price range (e.g., *The Glass Room* by Simon Mawer is \$0 to

\$14.99), but *not* either the length or the price per page. That particular book currently goes for \$7.99 as a Kindle ebook, so I guess this would be a good bet if you were fairly sure you'd give up in the first half of the book. Of course, it's far more Big Brother-ish than most ebooks: The site is monitoring your reading on a page-by-page basis.

I know my answer: Not a chance. But then, I mostly read library books.

A range of comments, since the stub post is mostly asking for comments. There are some who want "free eBooks sponsored by ads." There's a threnody on the Death of Physical Media ("No one consumes physical media anymore") that says it needs to be monthly all-you-can-read subscriptions. One dreamer says the first 75% of the book should be free, only charging if you want to read the last quarter. Some folks mention libraries. Most people weren't thrilled about the idea.

Our dream library: Unlimited e-books for less than \$10 a month

Speaking of Netflix for books, here comes Oyster, which notably does *not* come from Amazon—and sure has gotten a lot of press in its relatively brief life. For example, this Casey Johnston test-drive [on September 8, 2013](#) at *ars technica*.

You may already know the basics: An iPhone app that involves a monthly free and access to 100,000 titles. Lots of recommendations. No user reviews yet. Recommendations at least partly based on what you add to your reading list or rank as already read. \$9.95/month.

Up to ten books at a time are actually downloaded so you can read offline. The app scrolls vertically—but only within a page, apparently.

When it comes to actual reading, Oyster distinguishes itself from other popular book reading apps by using vertical scrolling. A table of contents menu lets you jump between chapter titles. The best part of the interface, by far, is some tiny text in the bottom right corner of the screen that tells you how many pages and minutes of reading are left in the chapter, obviating the need to page into the book to see where you can stop. As God is my witness, I shall never flip forward again!

Wow. *As God is your witness...*

Johnston looks at value in a way I find offensive:

There are arguments to be made about the subjective value propositions of books vs. TV vs. Movies, but it's all entertainment time for me. Broken down to a ratio of cost-to-time, nothing beats TV.

Despite how expensive seasons of TV shows are, at \$20 for 13 one-hour episodes, they come out to about \$15 for 10 hours. Books are a little more expensive: at \$10 for a 300-page book, that's about \$20 for 10 hours. Movies are outrageous at \$10-15 per two-hour movie; that works out to \$50-75 for 10 hours.

This makes Netflix's unlimited streaming a huge value for even casual movie watchers: one movie a month and you're doing fine, but I'd venture that most users get quite a bit more in. I myself watch an embarrassing amount of TV, so even though TV as a product is pretty cheap to come by, I'm making out like a bandit.

But never mind. (Libraries? Of course not: "the library sure is a lot farther than one grid space away from Twitter on my phone." And since *it's all just entertainment*, convenience is everything.)

It's fair to say my immediate reaction to this piece was not positive. A number of commenters were also less than thrilled by the idea that you weigh value between TV and books on a \$-per-hour basis—and the idea that public libraries are too inconvenient to bother with. Oh, and of course there's at least one troll saying reading doesn't really matter any longer.

Oyster Impressions

Joshua Kim offered this [on September 9, 2013](#) at *Inside Higher Ed*. He notes that he earlier asked how much people would pay Amazon each month to have unlimited access to all Kindle books. His answer was \$1 a day. So he was interested in the Oyster, offering to do much the same thing for \$10 a month.

They are trying to brand themselves as the Netflix of books. This seems like a very bad idea, given how utterly terrible Netflix's streaming catalogue is compared to what is available in their DVD-by-mail service.

Kim recounts his impression reading a book using the Oyster app. He's very enthusiastic about the app itself—reading, searching, browsing and the niceness of being able to try out a new book without paying more.

But...it's only 100,000 titles, and Kim believes Amazon will eventually offer its own subscription plan. In his own searching, he found that *none* of the 50 books he wanted most was in Oyster. He hopes that will improve. (It seems Kim is assuming that Amazon will be able to offer all ebooks in its subscription service.)

Only a few comments, with one repeat comment who seems to be saying you shouldn't criticize a new service for what it doesn't do, only praise it for what it does. Not in *this* world.

Why Print Is Here To Stay (A Not Anti-eBook Op/Ed)

Greg Zimmerman posted this [on January 10, 2012](#) at *BookRiot*. Given that late 2011/early 2012 might have been the peak of "ebooks are taking over!" hysteria (or not), it's a timely piece.

He begins by asking what percentage of the total book sales market is ebooks. "Is it half e-books? 60 percent? More?" He links to [a USA Today article](#) saying it's 20%--and he was floored by the percentage being that low.

The *USA Today* article is about how *well* ebook sales are doing, and it deals with immediate post-holiday sales, where people were loading up all those brand-new ereaders they received as gifts. And it notes a doubling from 10% in 2010 to 20% in 2011. But...20% of what? Trade books are only part of the print book market, and not a majority of it. Still, that may be irrelevant to Zimmerman's piece. What he's saying is what I've said for a very long time: There's no reason it's an either/or situation.

You often hear the analogy that e-books are to DVD or CDs as print books are to VHS or cassette tapes, and therefore print will soon disappear as those media did. But that's not quite right; it's a faulty analogy. Tapes and VHS went away because they were fundamentally inferior. There were disadvantages qualitywise to listening to tunes or watching movies in those media.

But there is nothing technically inferior about reading print. Sure, you can score points talking about convenience and (usually) price or many of the other ostensible advantages of e-books, but strictly in terms of consuming the medium, reading a print book vs. reading an e-book is nothing like listening to a CD vs. a tape, or watching a VHS vs. DVD. And for that reason — despite the fact that [analysts predict](#) the e-book market will surge to \$10 billion by 2016, up from \$3.2 billion now — print books are here to stay.

Then he says it explicitly:

Thankfully, e-books vs. print books isn't an either/or proposition. You don't have to choose one at the expense of the other. I'm currently reading a 900-page print book (11/22/63) AND an e-book (Jonathan Lethem's *The Ecstasy of Influence: Nonfictions, Etc.*). And I know a lot of other readers who do similar.

He seems to believe that in the relatively near future the proportions will be flipped, which would mean ebooks having 80% of the market. I'm less inclined to believe that. But we agree that it doesn't matter: "Print is not going the way of the eight-track. Not now. Maybe not even 100 years from now." (The first comment seems to think ebooks only took "a couple of years" to reach 20% and that they'll reach 80% within six years. Bad history leads to bad projections. The first Kindle appeared in 2007; there were many different ebook readers before that and ebooks long before there were ebook readers.)

I've said it was quite possible that ebooks could (almost) entirely replace mass-market paperbacks. I don't know that I *really* believe that, but it's the mostly likely either/or situation.

An ebook ten years later

This probably belongs under “history” but it follows so neatly on the previous, specifically that comment suggesting that ebooks had only been around for a couple of years by January 2012. It’s by—well, it’s signed “Librarian” and appeared [on January 24, 2012](#) on *Library Wire*.

In 2001 I read the book - [Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing](#). It is a nonfiction book about a man that got a job as a guard at Sing Sing prison and recounts his experiences.

At the time I had a RCA REB 1100 ebook reader. The REB stood for Rocket eBook. Rocket was bought by RCA and the first RCA device was given a number as a name.

What’s that? Not only were there ebooks in 2001, there were *second-generation* ebook readers? How can that be?

Remember how you purchased ebooks in the glory years of the Rocket? You *plugged a phone line* into the reader’s modem jack, downloaded a catalog, checked off the book you wanted, connected to the phone line again and downloaded the purchase. At, I’m guessing, 28Kbps tops. Easy-peasy.

“Librarian” *loved* the ebook and makes a snide comment about paper books being treated as “holy relics beyond reproach and criticism.” That’s beside the point. “Librarian” paid \$5.99 for the ebook itself. Each month, some ebooks were on sale for less than \$10; otherwise, you paid the full hardcover price. (The writer only purchased four or five books, being unwilling to spend more than \$12 a pop, before RCA shut down the operation.)

So now they check again: the Kindle version of the book sells for \$11.99—\$2 more than the paperback. “It was just funny to see a book that I purchased as an ebook over ten years ago selling on Amazon for more than paperback price.”

No larger point here—just a little corrective history for those who believe ebooks (which have been around for decades) or ebook readers (at least more than a decade) are brand-new.

What Amazon’s ebook strategy means

This [April 14, 2012 essay](#) by Charlie Stross at *Charlie’s Diary* could logically be in the “collusion” section that follows—but it covers a lot more territory and is eminently worth reading, even if I question Stross’s certainty that DRM on ebooks will be removed by publishers in a last-ditch effort to avoid Amazon’s smothering embrace.

It’s a longish piece. He takes time to define disintermediation, monopoly and *monopsony*—the supplier flipside of monopoly (where there are many sellers and only one buyer). He notes that Amazon wants to be both: a monopoly for book-buyers and a monopsony for publishers.

There's a fair amount about the history of book retailing and ebooks prior to 2008, the stupidity of DRM in general and more.

I won't excerpt it. It's interesting reading on its own. There are a staggering 759 comments—and I gave up after 29 of them, although many look to be thoughtful and worth reading. Just too damn long... (the scroll-bar handle had barely nudged off the top after 29).

Collusion

One response to competition is collusion—and although the items below could go in the Pricing section, they're about something more than absolute prices. They're about collusion.

The Collusion Case Against Publishers

John Scalzi posted this [on March 8, 2012](#) at *Whatever*, discussing a warning from the Department of Justice that it planned to sue five of the Big Six and Apple for colluding to raise the price of ebooks.

My immediate thought is that if all of them were in fact stupid enough to have colluded, then sue away, United States Justice Department. If they were dumb enough to collude, then they get what they get.

My next thought, however, is that I'll be interested in seeing if the case can be proven, because I don't think they *had* to act in concert. That Apple would be aware that publishers would be desirous of agency pricing in a general sense is not hard to imagine; Apple doesn't enter a market without knowing the players and how to leverage themselves to make a maximum splash and receive a maximum benefit. Once Apple made it known it would accept agency pricing (but not selling books at a higher price than other retail competitors), the publishing companies didn't have to act in concert, although one of them had to be willing to bell the very large cat called Amazon by moving to the agency model.

Come to think of it, maybe the "Collusion" section should be part of the following "Stupidity" section (since DoJ not only sued but won fairly sizable settlements in all cases.) Scalzi's primary publisher is an imprint of one of the sued companies (that is, Tor is part of Macmillan), and he assumed Macmillan challenged Amazon on agency pricing because it's privately held so didn't need to worry about stock prices. Once Amazon keeled over for Macmillan, the others could follow: that wouldn't require collusion. But, you know, acting legally is *slow*...

The column discusses some of what was going on here, which was a pricing issue but also an attempt by publishers to cut down Amazon (and put Apple in its place?). As it happens, Scalzi's already directly involved with not only Macmillan but also Amazon and others. What side is he on?

The question of whose side I am on is simple and obvious, to me at least: I'm on *my* side. My side wants my work available to readers in a way that that is affordable and easy to get in whatever format they prefer while at the same time allowing me to make a living doing what I do. In a larger sense, I'm also on the side of other writers, so that the end result of all this punching back and forth is not that authors are obliged to take contractual or retail positions that are detrimental to their interests, either as businesspeople or rights holders. Basically, my side doesn't want anyone else to screw up what I see is the actual goal of all of this as a working writer, namely, connecting my words to readers, and their cash to me.

Which strikes me as reasonable. While there are relatively few comments for a *Whatever* post—"only" 75—they are frequently long and involved comments, and as usual for this site add much to the discussion. (Included among them: An educational effort for a commenter who seems to think that one either *never* shops for the lowest price or *always* shops for the lowest price. People can make silly either/or cases about almost anything! Even after the discussion, another commenter asserted that low-income families will *obviously* value price-point above everything else. Which may be obvious, but is also flatly false.)

Ebooks: Defending the Agency Model

This [March 11, 2012](#) piece at *Monday Note* by Frédéric Filloux and Jean-Louis Gassée is the last in a series on ebooks, two previous episodes of which "explained how Amazon is maneuvering itself into a position to dominate the entire book industry." Thus, from the authors' viewpoint, it's silly for DoJ to "wave the threat of an antitrust action" against publishers and Apple for acting to undermine Amazon.

The piece does describe the wholesale model and agency model fairly well, although one example of how Amazon monopolizes a market by using the wholesale model is, um, bizarre. To wit: They note that you can buy *Time* at 89% off through Amazon, \$30 for 12 months rather than \$277.20. They call this an absurdly low price. Well, sure...except that \$277.20 is the *per-issue newsstand price*, which almost no American publisher would ever attempt to charge for subscriptions. Just this week, *Time* itself offered to sell me a year's subscription to *Time* for, ahem, \$20, not \$30. With a coupon enclosed to give me an extra six months free. So Amazon's charging more than twice as much as what *Time* will offer *some* readers directly. (They counter this with *Paris Match*—sold under the agency model—which goes for \$165 a year. Whew.)

The authors tell us that the wholesale model favors the retailer and is inherently deflationary (which is to say: it pushes prices down), while the agency mode is ever so much better because it keeps prices up. Oh, and "Pricing an item should be left to the one who produces it," because

of course intermediaries should have nothing to say. Therefore, I guess, DoJ should back off because publishers were acting in their own best interest (which people engaged in collusion *usually* are). As for Apple's virtues or defects in this arena? Well, consider the second author... I'm not saying taking a hard look at Apple is impossible in this case, but I wouldn't hold my breath either. (A comment notes that Isaacson's ~~hagiography~~ biography of Jobs "suggests" that Apple initiated the collusion.)

DoJ files antitrust suit against Apple, publishers over e-book prices

The actual antitrust suit is discussed in Jacqui Cheng's [April 11, 2012](#) *ars technica* article. It's a good, straightforward summary (probably earlier: the April 11 piece adds "(Updated)" to the title) and includes comments from the lead counsel in the consumer class-action lawsuit. Lots of comments, of course.

A Message from John Sargent

This [April 11, 2012 item](#) is in the nature of a letter as press release at Tor.com. (John Sargent is Macmillan's CEO.) He notes the lawsuit and that it's civil, not criminal. He notes the virtues of settling, but says the terms demanded were too onerous.

When Macmillan changed to the agency model we did so knowing we would make less money on our e book business. We made the change to support an open and competitive market for the future, and it worked. We still believe in that future and we still believe the agency model is the only way to get there.

It is also hard to settle a lawsuit when you know you have done no wrong. The government's charge is that Macmillan's CEO colluded with other CEO's in changing to the agency model. I am Macmillan's CEO and I made the decision to move Macmillan to the agency model. After days of thought and worry, I made the decision on January 22nd, 2010 a little after 4:00 AM, on an exercise bike in my basement. It remains the loneliest decision I have ever made, and I see no reason to go back on it now.

There's more, including a supportive quote from Scott Turow of the Author's Guild, which is about as convincing as I ever find Turow or AG: not much.

A row of "related posts" at the bottom of this one links to two others with the same title. The first, [dated December 19, 2012](#), notes that Penguin settled the lawsuit and Random House agreed to the terms (the two merged)—and reiterates that Macmillan has done nothing wrong and isn't settling. The second, [dated February 8, 2013](#), reiterated that Macmillan was innocent—but also says that they settled, because "our company is not large enough to risk a worst case judgment." It is worth

noting that it was Macmillan that forced Amazon to relent on its \$9.99 cap.

Conflict of interest statement: This may be a good place to note that Macmillan published six of my books as G.K. Hall between 1987 and 1992. The company always treated me fairly—and when I requested explicit reversion of rights after the books went out of print, a reversion that was not part of the contracts, the publisher provided letters granting that explicit reversion. So, as an author, I have no beef with Macmillan.

E-Books: What Next?

This Barbara Fister “Library Babel Fish” column [on April 11, 2012](#) at *Inside Higher Ed* could logically go in an ebooks-and-libraries roundup, when (if) that happens. But it also fits nicely here, since Fister includes not only notes on a campus survey of library book and ebook use but also the DoJ suit and related suits by 16 states. She notes that it’s not so much agency pricing as it is Apple’s role in price setting, and some of the aggressive moves Amazon has made in trying to dominate the ebook market even more thoroughly.

I admit to mixed feelings about all this, of the “devil v. deep blue sea” variety. I’m not a fan of giving Apple an advantage over other booksellers, but Amazon seems much more ripe for antitrust actions than just about any company involved in the book business, and the reason publishers cut a deal with Apple was precisely to create a competitor for a company that was aggressively discounting e-books to give its Kindle (which uses a proprietary e-book format) market dominance.

On the other hand, it’s hard for me to have any sympathy for these publishers, all of whom have told libraries, one way or another, to drop dead.

I’m not entirely convinced that Amazon’s moves are specifically designed to sell more Kindles, both because I don’t think Amazon makes much (or anything!) on typical Kindle sales and because Amazon now offers Kindle apps on almost every platform: You don’t need a Kindle to buy Kindle ebooks.

Then she gets into academic books, and she’s one of those who *knows* (correctly, I believe) that library “book budgets have shriveled in order to pay for crazy-expensive journals and databases.” So book publishers...want to license packages of ebooks!

I have no idea where any of this is going, but the notion of actually curating a collection designed around the needs of students enrolled at a particular institution with a locally-developed curriculum is increasingly seeming a quaint custom, and book that aren’t packaged in electronic bundles may have an even harder time finding a place in

libraries. Oh, and interlibrary loan may be a thing of the past, too. Many e-book packages don't allow that.

Worth reading on its own (as are most Fister pieces). She doesn't have strong conclusions—except she's pretty sure libraries won't be able to offer the kind of e-book service faculty and students are likely to want.

Dear Consumers Who Apparently Think the Current Drama Surrounding eBooks is Like a Football Game

That's John Scalzi's salutation on [this April 12, 2012 post](#) at *Whatever*—and the “current drama” is the lawsuit (and the efforts of Amazon and Apple to monopolize the ebook market). His key message is one people should remember whenever there's some corporate dispute:

Amazon is not on your side. Neither is Apple, or Barnes & Noble, or Google, or Penguin or Macmillan. These are all corporations, not sports teams, and with the exception of Macmillan, they are publicly owned. They have a fiduciary duty to their shareholders to maximize value. You are the means to that, not the end. The side these companies are on is their own side, and the side of their shareholders. This self-interest doesn't make them evil. It makes them corporations.

I might question his assertion that “Publishers...are interested in having as many online retailers as possible, each doing business with them on terms as advantageous to the publishers as possible.” I'd guess some publishers would just as soon work with the smallest number of intermediaries, as long as the publishers can push the intermediaries around. But the rest of what he's saying is right: It's not a sporting event; the “teams” are not on your side. As almost always with *Whatever*, the dozens of thoughtful comments add significantly to the discussion and bear reading. Which I might do someday, but not today...

A bunch of other stuff about the lawsuit

Brief takes on a few other items from April 11 to 13, 2012:

- “How Did Jon Sargent Get So Divorced From Reality?” is Alan Wexelblat's [April 11, 2012](#) *Copyfight* commentary on Sargent's memo (albeit not addressing the “we're innocent” claim), and it's a little mean-spirited but certainly amusing.
- Jacqui Cheng's [April 13, 2012](#) *ars technica* story is entitled “Apple: we broke ‘Amazon's monopolistic grip’ on e-book industry.” Apple not only claimed innocence, it says that the deals broke Amazon's monopoly and has resulted in “eBooks that are more interactive and engaging.” Since I don't use eBooks, I don't know what percentage of Apple's eBooks are “more interactive and engaging” than Kindle eBooks, but I'm guessing it's not much.
- Wexelblat goes way beyond the case itself in “Thinking About the E-Book Lawsuit and What Is To Come” [on April 13, 2012](#) at

Copyright. Now he's a full-fledged deathwatcher, predicting the demise of dedicated ebook readers (yes, he uses that word) for the same reasons point-and-shoot cameras disappeared (bet you didn't know that!), because "people" (all of them?) want multifunction devices and have no room for single-function devices.

- Victoria Strauss posted a good overview on [April 13, 2012](#) at *Writer Beware® Blogs!*: "The DOJ's Ebook Price Fixing Lawsuit Against Apple and the 'Agency Five': An Overview." Worth reading from a generally authorial perspective.

The Worst Article About The eBooks Anti-Trust Suit

I won't be dissecting [this April 16, 2012 piece](#) by Mike Cane at *Mike Cane's xBlog*. It's a brilliant extended rant by Cane, mostly fisking a *New York Times* article by David Carr.

Go read it. You may not agree with everything, but I think you'll enjoy the read. Really good fisking is rare these days.

Ignoring the Real Anticompetitive Behavior in the E-Book Antitrust Suit

Alan Wexelblat weighs in again [on April 18, 2012](#) at *Copyright*—and his main thesis (actually citing Cory Doctorow) is that antitrust regulators are looking at the wrong thing—that collusion on agency pricing might be illegal but "it's not half so anti-competitive as the kinds of platform locks that DRM and other restrictions the DOJ is giving a pass to." A quick read with some useful links; if you're trying to follow that suit and its commentaries, probably worth reading.

Why Everyone is Probably Wrong About the DoJ Ebooks Case

That unfortunate universalism starts out Hugh Rundle's [April 19, 2012 essay](#) at his eponymous website—and "everyone" aside, he makes a couple of good points. I'll highlight these:

- Saying DoJ is failing because Amazon's the real problem is irrelevant: "The Department of Justice is not empowered to pass judgement on Amazon's business model, unless it breaches US law, and nobody appears to have any evidence that it does." DoJ is not supposed to pick winners and losers; it is supposed to deal with the law.
- Saying "Amazon gives me cheap ebooks; what's the problem?" misses the issues of monopsony and lock-in. But the main reason Amazon has a stranglehold on ebook sales is "the publishers' own pig-headed insistence on a model that has already failed once before—Digital Rights Management." Take away DRM, and independent bookstores and online retailers could more readily sell ebooks, providing competition for Amazon.

There's a lot more to the piece, including a detailed suggestion for undermining Amazon; you can read it in the original.

Judge Eases Proposed Restrictions in Apple Price-Fixing Case

I didn't tag a lot of items on this case; I suspect it's easy enough to find commentary on how it progressed. Ian Chant offers [this September 6, 2013](#) commentary at *Library Journal*. The key point is that Apple, at least, was [found liable](#) for conspiring to raise prices on ebooks in July 2013.

While the judge denied Apple's request to put penalties on hold while it appealed the decision, the judge did modify the [original proposed penalties](#)—Apple terminating its deals with the Big Five and avoiding any new agreements “that are likely to increase the prices at which Apple's competitor retailers may sell that content.” Oh, and with an appointed monitor of Apple's compliance policies. Oh, and requiring Apple to allow other ebook retailers to sell books directly within their own iOS apps rather than funneling everything through iBooks.

This piece discusses a modification of the proposed penalties.

While a monitor will still be required, the position will only be in place for two years, with the possibility of a one year extension, and will primarily advise on training procedures for antitrust compliance, rather than reporting on Apple's day-to-day business. The plan to let other retailers link out to their ebook stores, meanwhile, was entirely scrapped.

A provision that would have forced Apple to end its existing deals with publishers has been softened as well. Rather than terminate the deals the company had with publishers, Apple will now be obliged only to “modify” them. The new agreement also narrows its focus to Apple's iBooks Store, ensuring that DOJ won't try to regulate Apple's App Store more generally.

Not that this is the end of things: There may still be punitive damages and there's still a class-action suit. Meanwhile, the Big Five all settled with DoJ, paying a total of \$164 million in damages.

In other words: Yes, it's reasonable to assume that there was collusion; five defendants settled and Apple lost. I didn't cover some early articles saying that DoJ would certainly lose this case, but there certainly were such articles.

DRM

It comes up in a bunch of other areas, but sometimes it's *only* about DRM. Did I mention that Lulu, where I do my self-publishing, no longer supports DRM? It won't add it to new PDFs or EPUB files and it won't sell ebooks that contain DRM. In other words, Lulu *sells* ebooks; it doesn't lease them. They're not the only ones...

Tor/Forge E-book Titles to Go DRM-Free

That's the heading on a press release from Tor.com [on April 24, 2012](#). (Tor and Forge are both imprints of Macmillan but operate as Tom Doherty Associates.) Maybe the first paragraph is enough:

Tom Doherty Associates, publishers of Tor, Forge, Orb, Starscape, and Tor Teen, today announced that by early July 2012, their entire list of e-books will be available DRM-free.

There's a bit more, but not much, mostly Tom Doherty saying authors and readers have been asking for this.

Tor Books goes completely DRM-free

Cory Doctorow thought this announcement was worth a writeup [on April 24, 2012](#) at *boingboing*. He notes that Tor is the world's largest science fiction publisher and hints at a connection between this announcement and the Apple collusion lawsuit.

Now that there is a major publisher that has gone completely DRM-free (with more to follow, I'm sure; I've had contact with very highly placed execs at two more of the big six publishers), there is suddenly a market for tools that automate the conversion and loading of ebooks from multiple formats and vendors.

For example, I'd expect someone to make a browser plugin that draws a "Buy this book at BN.com" button on Amazon pages (and vice-versa), which then facilitates auto-conversion between the formats. I'd also expect BN.com to produce a "switch" toolkit for Kindle owners who want to go Nook (and vice-versa).

I haven't seen a flood of other big-publisher DRM-free announcements over the past 16 months.

Tor/Forge To Go DRM-Free By July: Immediate Thoughts

Given that John Scalzi's primary publisher (or at least one of them) is Tor, it's hardly surprising that he wrote this [on April 24, 2012](#) at *Whatever*. He quotes the entire press release, then notes that he called Patrick Nielsen Hayden (senior editor at Tor) to ask what this would mean "for the publisher's efforts regarding online misappropriation of author copyrights." I guess Scalzi means "piracy" by that phrasing. The response, which he quotes, is basically that Macmillan and Tor will continue to pursue major infringers.

Then Scalzi opines. As an author, he didn't see much advantage to DRM—he didn't think it stopped "piracy" and he knows it inconveniences law-abiding readers. He'd already been planning to ask Tor whether he could make his ebooks DRM-free.

Does this mean it's easier for someone to violate my copyright? It does. But most people don't want to violate my copyright. Most

people just want to *own* their damn books. Now they will. I support that. And I believe that most readers who like my work will support me. They get that if I don't get paid, they won't get books — and more than that I really do believe most people who *can* support the artists whose work they like *will* support them. So personally I don't think ditching DRM will mean people will stop buying what I and Tor have to sell.

As for those “who don't give a crap about me or my career” and put up infringing copies for others to take? He's already been informing Tor about such sites and says they do an admirable job of “sending their legal strike teams against them.” Indeed, Scalzi offers litigation as one reason he sticks with a large publisher.

He suspects other publishers will follow.

More than 130 comments; pretty much all of the 20 or so that I read are supportive. (He conditioned the comment stream by saying “this one's about DRM, not the antitrust suit”—not in those words.)

He links to “More on DRM and ebooks” by Charles Stross, [a long, long post](#) that includes all sorts of predictions about the future of ebooks, ebook readers, etc. (Stross is one of those “multipurpose beats single-purpose” folks when it comes to readers.) I won't even attempt to summarize the Stross post, much less the 326 comments.

In which I [try to buy|finally buy] an ebook

Two posts by John Mark Ockerbloom at *Everybody's Libraries*, “try to buy” [on July 29, 2012](#), “finally buy” [on July 30, 2012](#).

Ockerbloom buys print books, and he owns some ebooks—but the ones he owns are either public domain, bundled with print books or otherwise legitimately ones that he *owns*.

Unfortunately, there weren't many ebooks of interest that I could buy—at least not if “buying” means “owning”. Oh, I could call up a store app on my Nook, or go to Amazon online, where they offered me book files in return for some money and my consent to a take-it-or-leave-it agreement. A file I paid for wouldn't be a book I owned, it would be a file that I licensed under a non-negotiable contract...

The paid DRM-free ebooks around were either books he preferred to read in print or ones that didn't interest him. He was thrilled, therefore, by the Tor announcement, since Tor has authors he likes.

So he set out to buy a Tor book, specifically *Redshirts*—but it wasn't as easy as he'd hoped:

I originally planned to buy the ebook on its release date. But even when an author and a publisher are ready to go, it can take a while to get the retailers on board. On the day *Redshirts* came out, many ebook stores delivered DRM-locked files instead of the DRM-free edition readers

expected. (Thankfully, Tor [offered free exchanges](#) almost right away.) More worrisome to me, though, was that many of the major ebook retailer sites wouldn't complete a transaction unless I first indicated consent to a "take it or leave it" agreement that appeared to sign away important rights readers normally have to books they buy. Unlike the print books I bought in the bookstore, my enjoyment of the ebooks I got from these sellers would be restricted by their contractual demands, above and beyond the standard constraints of copyright law. DRM or no DRM, the ebooks would not truly be my own if I agreed to those demands.

But he persevered...and that's the next post.

His requirements for an ebook store he'd buy from are in the second post. Briefly: 1: the store must sell a DRM-free copy in convenient format; 2: the store must make the format and DRM-free status clear; 3: the store must not require him to give up his rights.

He details his attempts. B&N (he owns a Nook, so that's the natural first stop): fail on #2 and #3. Amazon: fail on all three. Google Play: fail on #2 and #3. Sony Reader store: Unclear and he won't give Sony the benefit of the doubt. Independent bookstores: Not much.

Diesel eBooks: Finally, success—a few weeks after the ebook was first released. So it can happen.

The music industry dropped DRM years ago. So why does it persist on e-books?

That Cyrus Farivar could even ask this [question on December 24, 2012](#) at *ars technica* suggests that Cory Doctorow's "Tor's just the first of many..." suggestion could have been premature.

Oddly, the article mentions "some smaller publishing houses" beginning to abandon DRM—and the link is to a story about Tor's decision. That's odd because (a) Tor is, apparently, the world's largest science fiction company and (b) Tor is an imprint of Macmillan, which is hardly a "smaller publishing house." (OK, it's smaller than the rest of the Big Five. Do you think of Ford as a "smaller auto company"?)

Farivar thinks the lack of outrage (he notes that Cory Doctorow doesn't agree there's no outrage) has a lot to do with Amazon making a Kindle reading application for "pretty much every platform imaginable," thus leaving many consumers (possibly) unaware that their books are DRM-protected.

One section is bizarre: He suggests DRM persists because books are a "smaller market." Huh? Book publishing is *several* times as large a market as sound recordings.

Oh, but *in 2011* digital music revenue was about twice *ebook* revenue. So ebooks were at that point a smaller slice of a much larger market. And here's a bizarre quote:

“Maybe it’s the low status of books in general,” Alissa Quart, the editor-at-large at *The Atavist*, “Book buyers don’t get to get as outraged as music fans.”

There’s a link to *The Atavist* (which publishes midlength fiction), and you can find it if you want—but I’m not linking to a text-publishing operation whose editor thinks books have low status.

Farivar offers other possibilities, including the lack of a “culture of remix” among book readers. (Well, there’s fanfic, but...) Then he brings up subscription services. It’s all sort of a hodgepodge.

Stupidity

It’s tempting to suggest that “Major Publishers” is a synonym for this heading, but that’s unfair. Much of what’s here could appear under Pricing and in some cases it’s pretty clear that Amazon is (ir)responsible for the stupidity Still...

Macmillan Books Gone Missing From Amazon

Lest we forget: This post appeared on [January 29, 2010](#), by John Scalzi on *Whatever*. Scalzi’s primary book publisher is Tor, which is a Macmillan imprint. Here’s the lead paragraph:

On Twitter a couple of minutes ago someone expressed annoyance that my books aren’t directly sold by Amazon, which seemed odd, because they were available just yesterday. But I check and sure enough they weren’t there (Amazon has its “available from these sellers”) line up. I checked other Tor authors and it seemed they were gone too. I noted that on Twitter and then someone pointed me to [this news post](#), which suggests many books from Macmillan are off Amazon at the moment.

After some additional comments, he notes that the Tor books were still readily available from other websites—and from real bookstores.

You can follow the links in the post (or in the links, for that matter), but here’s the short version: Macmillan was unhappy with Amazon’s \$9.99 price (or, to put it another way, Amazon was unhappy with Macmillan’s desired \$14.99 price), and Macmillan knew it could set a higher price for the iPad version, so...

A followup post [the next day](#) really does belong in the Pricing section, but since I’ve already mentioned it here, I won’t there. In that post, Scalzi offers some incisive comments about ebooks with DRM, the free market, the viability of variable pricing and more. Here’s one particularly nice paragraph:

This asinine jockeying over electronic book prices has very little to do with what’s actually good or useful for anyone other than the manufacturer of a piece of hardware... who also happens to be a book

retailer. I understand Amazon's desire to corner the electronic book market with the Kindle, which requires publishers to bend to its will on pricing, but I'm not notably sympathetic to it. In one of those grand ironies of life, I've been here before with the iPod, a thing for which I buy music not from Apple but from Amazon, which sold DRM-free mp3s and earned my music purchasing dollars because of it (and who, if memory serves, allowed for some flexibility in pricing). Now my iPod touch is filled with music not bought from Apple. If these companies' relative positions flip because of books, well, now. That would be *funny*.

Scalzi's an author. As he points out, the more publishers charge, the more he makes (on a percentage royalty basis). He also buys a lot of books—and remembers how vendors (in this case Amazon, not Macmillan) treat him.

Whatever posts frequently get lots of comments and unusually thoughtful ones (they're also moderated). This post got 436 comments, enormously high even for *Whatever*. Just glancing at the first couple of dozen, they raise a lot of worthwhile points.

Scalzi posted more on this—e.g., “All The Many Ways Amazon So Very Failed the Weekend” [on February 1, 2010](#). It's clear he considers Amazon to be the Villain in this melodrama; hey, he's a Macmillan author, so that's no real surprise. Is he right? Possibly so. On the other hand, he seems to draw from the experience the lesson that it dooms Amazon...that it means we'll all go out and buy iPads instead of Kindles. There are 393 comments on this post. Some are insightful. Some are silly (the person who claims that Kindle owners “really don't give a crap about an extra \$5 per book because they paid for the damned Kindle!”). More than one suggests that moving from one proprietary platform to an even more tightly locked-down platform (the iPad) might not be ideal. Scalzi as a prophet of the fall of Amazon (or at least the Kindle)? Well, hey, nobody's perfect.

This might be a good place for a personal interjection. I'm no great fan of Amazon. I won't pay them an annual fee for free second-day shipping (our broadband isn't fast enough to make the freebie streaming worthwhile). If I can buy something locally for a slightly higher price than I could buy it through Amazon, bricks & mortar wins every time. Yes, I own a Kindle Fire HD 8.9—because it was one of only two plausible ways to read the *San Francisco Chronicle* for a reasonably monthly sum and was a lot cheaper than the only other high-def possibility (an iPad Retina). Of course, I'm considerably *less* a fan of Apple than I am of Amazon, and I'd take Amazon over the iStores any day, but that's a different discussion. So far, I'm simply not much of an ebook reader, because print books suit me well and I get 99% of my books from the library. As you can probably guess, I'm not much of a fan of Big Publishing either (I guess it's the Big Five now). My own ebooks? Generally in non-DRM PDF form, but one's also on the Kindle

because it was an easy one to format using Kindle's converter. I think I've sold one copy of that one.

The Rationality of One-Star Reviews

This could go in the Price section, since it's mostly about the extent to which ebook buyers (or would-be buyers) are exercised about prices. But in this case, I thought it belonged here (no, even though I find "rationality" as used by economists to be a loaded term, I'm *not* using it for Dan Ariely, who posted this [on April 10, 2011](#) on his eponymous blog—I'm using it to apply to one-star reviews given *strictly* on the basis of price).

The case in point: Michael Connelly's *The Fifth Witness*. When Hachette published it, the price at Amazon was \$14.99 for the Kindle version and \$14.28 for the hardback. Connelly actually thinks it's *reasonable* to charge more for the Kindle version (ah, economic rationality is a fine thing):

From a utility point of view, charging more for the Kindle version seems quite reasonable considering that Kindle books are delivered instantly and for free, that they take up no additional space or weight, that they can be read on any computer, and that they come with handy bookmarks and highlights of what other readers find interesting.

Never mind. The point here is that customers "were outraged!" and flooded the product page with one-star reviews based on pricing.

Ariely is puzzled by how sensitive book buyers are to price differentials, especially given how much time it takes to read a good book. But his is clearly not the only perspective, as he admits:

The problem is that it is really hard to think this way. It is not easy to focus on what we really care about (the quality of the time we spend) rather than the salient attribute of price. And on top of that the unfairness of the differences in price can make us mad

The post drew 143 comments. Several people noted the virtues of the print book (and production cost differences), specifically given Amazon's record with DRM and (at the time) grabbing back books. It's a long set of frequently interesting, thoughtful comments...a set that I did not attempt to read all the way through.

I did think it would be interesting to see how things have settled out 29 months later. Currently, the Kindle version goes for \$7.59 and the hardcover goes for \$11.20 (the paperback's a few cents *more* than the hardcover; the mass-market paperback's \$8.48). The book has 710 customer reviews, averaging out to 3.5 stars—but indeed, there are 173 one-star reviews. Clicking on them shows a fair number who thought it was a terrible book—but more who were only bitching about price.

Maybe I'm putting this item here because the first Amazon "review" of *Open Access: What You Need to Know Now* was an ebook pricing attack by someone who had no intention of reading the book. It's still there. (Since the reviewer also assumes that Open Source and open access are the same thing—and seemed to be assuming that the book was the result of ALA-commissioned work, which it was not—I didn't take it too seriously. I'm sure it didn't help sales, though.)

It is a reading revolution, and there will be blood

This manifesto by switch11 [on April 23, 2011](#) at *Kindle Review* pretty well speaks for itself in painting a black-and-white, then-and-now, Publishers are The Enemy and Serve No Purpose perspective.

It helps if you regard both authors and books as wholly fungible, interchangeable parts. If that's true, then readers really are in control and nothing should cost more than \$3. Maybe for some readers, as long as it's cheap, it doesn't much matter whether it's any good—and maybe some authors have such vast recognition that neither the editorial work of a publisher nor the marketing and distribution are worth anything.

When somebody writes a sentence like "Authors who prioritize readers will get rewarded," I'm inclined to believe that sensitivity to good writing may not be a factor for that person.

I'd like to believe the Big Five will become less important over time. Do I believe "a lot of Publisher blood is going to be spilt"? Not so much, at least not because all the worthwhile authors will go Indie (whatever that might mean) and decide that \$3 ebooks are all that counts. But then, I also don't believe print books are going away.

The Tsunami of Crap

Here's a pointed piece about another kind of ebook-related stupidity (or maybe it's self-publishing-related stupidity), as discussed by Joe Konrath [on July 5, 2011](#) at *A Newbie's Guide to Publishing*. The lede:

Some people believe the ease of self-publishing means that millions of wannabe writers will flood the market with their crummy ebooks, and the good authors will get lost in the morass, and then family values will go unprotected and the economy will collapse and the world will crash into the sun and puppies and kittens by the truckload will die horrible, screaming deaths.

Or something like that.

As you might guess Konrath—a reasonably successful genre fiction writer who has done some self-publishing—isn't buying it:

This is bullshit, of course. A myth. A fabrication. One rooted in envy and fear.

The way Konrath sees it, readers are good at finding books they want despite huge selections. They're able to go into bookstores stocking 150,000 titles and find a book they'll actually want. "They can go into a library, and ten minutes later walk out with a handful of books that interest them." Despite overwhelming numbers of websites, Amazon choices, YouTube videos, etc., etc., most of us find things we'll want.

Konrath also doesn't think readers care whether something is self-published (but, I hate to say, libraries sure do). He notes Goodreads.com as a way for readers to become gatekeepers.

Anyone paying the slightest bit of attention knows that ereaders are actually increasing the number of books bought, and causing people to read more. There aren't droves of readers ditching their Kindles because they bought a bad indie ebook. Rather, there are hundreds of new ereaders and many thousands of new ebooks sold every day.

That's a particularly interesting comment because there's good reason to believe that ereader owners also buy lots of *print* books. In any case, Konrath says it's not readers saying this stuff: It's legacy writers, who fear loss of income if their stuff isn't good enough.

Konrath's comment: There's always been crap. There always will be crap. (Sturgeon's Law?)

A digression: I knew that Theodore Sturgeon said, not quite in so many words, 90% of *everything* is crud—mostly as a response to the stupidity of saying that 90% of science fiction was crud. He didn't actually use the word "crap" and he called it Sturgeon's Revelation, not Sturgeon's Law. There actually was a Sturgeon's Law, which I also like given the amount of nonsensical universalism I encounter: "Nothing is always absolutely so." Credit to Wikipedia for [an unusually informative piece](#).

Anyway: Konrath's advice? (I'll ignore the unfortunate "Get over it.") We don't need to be protected from indie ebooks...and if you're really worried about readers being subjected to crap, you can help by not writing crap.

More than 300 comments. Didn't read them all.

iBooks, the one and only

I have several early-2012 items that I skipped over, having to do with iBooks adopting a preferred ebook format that wrapped a proprietary wrapper around the open EPUB standard. It was a little too "inside baseball" to include.

"Apple's Evil Sabotage," Alan Wexelblat's [January 26, 2012](#) piece at *Copyright*, links to some of those discussions (by Ed Bott and others) and adds another issue that I didn't pick up. Apparently, the EULA for Apple iBooks 2.0 creation tool not only gives Apple the right to sell any iBook

you make using the tool—”it also claims the right to prevent you from selling it elsewhere, even if Apple rejects it.”

As Bott notes, even if this is a condition on your use of Apple’s software it’s an unprecedentedly restrictive one. It is as if Adobe claimed you couldn’t sell any photograph you processed in Photoshop (except through Adobe). Or if Microsoft claimed you couldn’t sell any book you wrote in Word (except through Microsoft). If those examples seem ludicrous on the face of it, that’s only because word- and photo-processing software is well established in the marketplace and there are competitors and years of user expectations in place. E-books are a new beast and it looks like Apple wants to own the cow and the milk, in perpetuity.

The rest of the piece discusses the stuff I was ignoring—the extent to which iBooks 2.0 undermines EPUB as an open standard.

Beyond Narrative Text

I’ve ignored most of the trickle of articles about what ebooks *should* be, although I’ve commented on some over the years. You know the kind: We’ll *really* have ebooks when we get away from boring old narrative text—by making books into movies or by adding all sorts of other enhancements. I should note that people who think every book should (and will!) be a movie can be counted on to have little knowledge of what it takes to make an effective movie—or, for that matter, what it takes to write an effective book. But I do tag a few of these articles or related ones, such as those that follow.

Time called on enhanced e-books at LBF digital conference

This is a news item [from October 4, 2011](#) (although it appears to be in the September 6, 2011 issue) by Philip Jones at *The Bookseller*. The lede (I should start using that hotshot journalism term, shouldn’t I):

Enhanced e-books are dead, discoverability is the most important issue facing e-book vendors, while pricing strategies should be measured against other digital content, not physical books. These were the key themes that emerged from the London Book Fair’s Digital Conference, *The Digital Now: Creating Lasting Value*.

The headline comes from Evan Schnittman’s keynote (he’s at Bloomsbury, a British publisher), “with his pronouncement that enhanced content for narrative-based e-books was dead in the water.” He thought enhanced ebooks had an “incredibly big future in education” but that enhancement for narrative reading text—is “just a non-starter.”

Others disagreed, touting “book apps” (that is, books that you buy, er, lease as software rather than as, you know, *books*) as hot stuff—but some other speakers also agreed. I like Benedicte Evans’ comment:

“When cheap colour printing came in, people didn’t decide you should have colour photos on each page, and the text in different coloured fonts.”

There’s more to the report, but those comments struck me as remarkably sensible. Note that Evans wasn’t saying that color has no place in books—just that it’s pointless for *most* books. The same, I suspect, goes for other forms of enhancement.

One comment (by Jan Strnad) is particularly noteworthy, even if it’s about an entirely different medium:

Enhanced ebooks remind me of enhanced DVDs.

At first I was excited to get the director’s commentary and a bunch of extras on DVDs, but that enthusiasm went away quickly when I decided I’d rather watch a different movie than re-watch the one I’d just seen but with commentary.

A good book doesn’t really need “enhancing.”

I still like the extras...but I must admit, more than a year (or two?) after we purchased the three *Lord of the Rings* 4-DVD boxes, I have yet to watch any of the multiple commentary versions on each one, and wonder whether I ever will.

Enhanced and Disenchanted

Not someone I’d normally follow, but [this September 14, 2012 article](#) by David Byrne (yes, *that* David Byrne) on his *Journal* was decidedly worth including here.

Byrne wrote a book, [How Music Works](#). The reviews have been quite favorable (some day, I’ll probably read it). McSweeney’s published it.

He also did an enhanced ebook, this time enhanced for extremely good reasons: to play short musical snippets that help demonstrate the concepts mentioned in the text.

That’s the “enhanced” part. McSweeney’s and Byrne are trying to make the enhanced ebook work on as many devices as possible—Byrne turned down an iBooks Author program that would have locked it to Apple. Here’s the “disenchanted”:

It’s been an incredibly frustrating experience, and we’re not out of the woods yet. These companies all created their own proprietary formats—both to try to lock you into buying from their stores and (probably at the insistence of big publishers) to make it really, really hard to share or lend a book to a friend, as one often does with physical books. That’s sad, as gifting is both an important kind of social glue, and it also helps spread the word of mouth about books that folks fall in love with. Like mix tapes, they turn readers on to books they didn’t know about.

There is an iBook version. As of the time this post appeared, there wasn't a Kindle or Nook version *that would play the music* (although apparently there's a version for the Kindle App that does—just not on a Kindle Fire).

I'd like to apologize to anyone who is interested in this book and wants to buy an enhanced eBook that will play music—we don't want to offer it in these formats until it is working. Sorry. Meanwhile, the physical book is a truly lovely object, should one want to go the old fashioned route.

Do enhanced ebooks have to be apps? Does that make sense?

The short but effective window where ereaders changed the industry
Here's an odd one, by Nathaniel Mott [on December 24, 2012](#) at *pandodaily*. It's odd partly because it doesn't seem to be *at all* about the title. Instead, Mott is *celebrating* the drop in dedicated ereader shipments from 2011 to 2012:

If these projections are to be believed, the ereader craze is flaming out as quickly as it ignited. And if you're in the business of creating content, that's a good thing.

Why? The placement of this item should give you a clue: “Despite a [Pew report](#) saying that many readers prefer the text-heavy article of old, media as a whole is embracing video, animations, unique layouts, and the Web to create a new, better experience.”

Note that: It doesn't *matter* that people may prefer boring old “text-heavy articles.” Nope. “Media as a whole” (whatever that might mean) is going for a new, *better* experience, presumably one that has video and animations *everywhere*.

He offers a couple of examples of multimedia books as part of a claim of inevitability.

Books are changing. Media is changing. The way we read is changing. In order for those things to happen we need to abandon tools that replicate the old and embrace new devices. Ereaders made a fine halfway point between reading on a tablet and reading a paper-based book. In fact, they rejuvenated book sales by allowing impulse payments for the first time. But even if you think the future of the book will be dominated by text, their time has now passed.

Oh. I see now why he could use this title. Because ereaders got us away from those pathetic old print books—but now “the way we read” is changing, because everything should be video. Right?

There were no comments on the (text-only, one photo) article, apparently. Maybe that's appropriate.

What's a Book?

These notes are orthogonal to “beyond narrative text”; they have more to do with length and the like than with whether there’s multimedia stuff added to a book’s text.

What’s a book? It’s whatever you want it to be

Matthew Ingram offers that concise and possibly satisfactory response as the title of this July 22, 2011 discussion at *gigaom*. It’s a little disconcerting to see a one-paragraph summary on a piece that’s only ten fairly short paragraphs in total, but I guess busy readers need the 30-second version.

The theme here isn’t specifically about length; it’s about “media companies” repurposing existing content as instant, typically short ebooks. The specific example: an incredibly extensive review of OS X Lion by John Siracusa in *ars technica*. The website (I’d call it an online magazine, but I’ve come to distrust that term) [offered it](#) as an ebook through the Kindle Single program for \$4.99.

Understand: you could also [read the review for free online](#) and, for that matter, download it and read it later. You still can, although by now it may be a little dated. And yet, *within 24 hours* of the Kindle Single being available, 3,000 people had purchased it. (The review had three *million* pageviews on the web, but \$14,970 is a nice chunk of extra money, even if Amazon keeps some of it.)

In this specific case, *ars technica* keeps the money—Siracusa gets a one-time advance payment for each new iOS overview.

Here’s the thing: Siracusa’s review is 27,000 words long—novella-length, in other words. That’s a *lot* of text to read from the web, and Siracusa’s writing is good enough to go back to. Worth an extra fiver to read it on a Kindle? Quite possibly. (The 6” x 9” books I produce have about 250 words to a page, so you can figure 27,000 words would be roughly 130 pages.)

As the story points out, newspapers and others have been doing quickie books for some time—but where it would take at least a week or so to turn newspaper content into a printed book, you could probably do it within a few hours via ebook processes, and since the copy has already been copyedited, laid out and proofread, there’s very little overhead.

I’d suggest that Ingram makes a little too much of the “transformation” brought about by shorter ebooks. Novellas have been published as brief books for decades (centuries?) and books can notoriously be as short as 20 pages or as long as binding will allow. Speed and cost, yes. Length as a major new variable? I’m not so sure it’s all that new, but maybe. If it means there’s more of a market for short stories and novelettes, I’m all for it.

In E-Books, Publishers Have Rivals: News Sites

This [September 18, 2011](#) *New York Times* report by Julie Bosman and Jeremy W. Peters fits here because it's about the same idea—instant ebooks from newspapers, magazines and others, reusing existing material, usually at shorter length than traditional nonfiction books.

Sometimes those instabooks even reach best-seller lists. A Macmillan person admits that these ebooks are competition—but makes a somewhat interesting claim for why Big Publishers still matter: where more than one magazine/newspaper did instabooks on Rupert Murdoch in the wake of the phone scandal, “I’m going to get the book on Rupert Murdoch that is the definitive book for all time.” *The definitive book for all time!*

Naturally, some Big Publishers are co-opting the idea—partnering with websites for brief ebooks. And there’s another “advantage”—when *Huffington Post* puts out an instabook, it’s not going to put up a big advance any more than it pays its contributors decently.

One example spelled out is interesting: *Vanity Fair* collected twenty articles it had run about Rupert Murdoch and his businesses, added an introduction, grouped the articles and put out a \$3.99 ebook that’s almost certainly not only a fine bargain but revelatory. Given the provenance, these are all fact-checked and copy-edited articles. (Hmm. Another example is a *New Yorker* ebook using a collection of the magazine’s writing on a particular topic. The *New Yorker* is part of Condé Nast, same as *Vanity Fair*.)

Are Serialized Ebooks a Bad Idea?

That’s the question raised in [this June 6, 2010 post](#) by Marc Coker (Smashwords’ founder) at *Smashwords*, the official blog of Smashwords. (I know it’s out of chronological order. It somehow got tagged 21 months after it was written.) Coker notes that Charles Dickens serialized his novels and offers this great comment:

Whereas the traditional story has a beginning, a middle and an end, the serial novel is often characterized by the never-ending middle. The author starts the story, and then releases new installments over time.

I’d guess there are at least two kinds of serialized novels: Ones where a fully written novel is published in parts for whatever reason (e.g., *Analog Science Fiction* still serializes one or two novels a year)—and ones where a writer sets out on a course yielding a stream of installments, not necessarily sure where it will end. (I’m *guessing* one classic failed attempt at installment ebooks by Stephen King may have been that sort of situation.)

Coker finds the topic interesting because, when he looked at Smashwords’ home page on June 6, it was dominated by five 10,000-

word installments of a single ebook. Another day, Coker asked an author to *stop* posting a series of 2,000-word “ebooks.”

At Smashwords, we have a strict policy of only publishing complete, finished works. If you want to publish a partial book, or a work-in-process, we don't want it, because it doesn't fit with our mission of connecting a reader's eyeballs and wallet to the finished works of our indie authors and publishers. If a customer purchases an unfinished, incomplete or partial work, they feel ripped off.

But...”I created Smashwords to eliminate gatekeepers, not to become one.” So he asked Smashwords customers to share their opinion and posted an online poll—and early (tiny) results showed 91% of respondents disliking serialized ebooks.

Coker offers several reasons why readers may dislike serialized ebooks. I think they're good ones and suggest you read them in the original. (The poll ran for two months and garnered 166 responses, of which only 9% preferred serials and 58% *never* read them. Coker admits that the poll was flawed.)

He does think that, if Smashwords did embrace serialized ebooks, it should only do so for books that are finished before submission.

Ah, but what's a serialized book? What if you have three 90,000-word ebooks...which are all part of a continuing story? *Lord of the Rings*—is that a serialized book?

Miscellany

Items that don't fit neatly into other subcategories.

5 ways to really revolutionize the book business

This comes from Dwight Silverman [on January 5, 2012](#) at “Bookish,” a *Chron* blog. (What's *Chron*? Apparently the Houston *Chronicle*'s website.)

It's not really a listicle. Silverman's all hot for the digital transformation, apparently, but things aren't changing fast *enough* for him. He offers five suggestions. Without his expansions, here are the five topic sentences: Let me subscribe to my favorite authors. Keep books updated for one price. Buy a print copy, get an electronic copy, too. Give more of my money to authors. Indie bookstores should sell e-books.

The third one's a fairly common request (and happens to some extent with some specialized publishers). The fifth seems entirely sensible to me, and some indie bookstores appear to be doing that. I guess I'm not sufficiently author-oriented to believe author subscriptions would be a big business; I'd note that this could help reinforce BrandAuthors like “James Patterson” and lock out new authors, but maybe not. As for the second one...so people who keep laboring to improve a book don't deserve to be paid for that labor?

one piece of the changing landscape

Jenica Rogers posted this [on April 15, 2012](#) at *attempting elegance*. The heart of it: an author she really likes wanted to do a novella about a character from a series; the publisher probably didn't want it...so she did a Kickstarter project: if her fans wanted it, great.

Turns out her fans did want it. A lot. More than \$20,000 worth: "more than any New York City publisher has paid me up front for a book," to quote the author. She expanded the idea to cover a novel's worth of material—two novellas, four short stories and three chapters of a not-yet-written book. Quoting Rogers:

I think that is a remarkable thing, and that it indicates something about the future of publishing. Consider that because of this Kickstarter she had the cash and the time and the desire, all at the same time, to write something that there is a proven and known demand for. And which she was able to distribute herself, because sending 517 e-pub files via email is no big these days. And which she can then re-sell to a traditional house if she so chooses, because there are plenty of readers out there who are not reached by Kickstarter, the internet, or e-pub files. And which the traditional publishing houses ought to be paying very close attention to.

The future is now. The traditional publishers need to do more than react to that.

Rogers sent email to the author, which she reprints in her post.

That this—not only self-publishing but also crowdfunded ebooks—will be one piece of the changing landscape? No doubt, and almost certainly a good thing overall. At what point would typical libraries buy such items? Maybe I shouldn't ask that question. (The effect of crowdfunding on the morale of authors who don't come close to meeting their targets? Please don't ask.)

Project Gutenberg Self Publishing

I tagged [this site](#) on July 16, 2012—and it's still a little peculiar. The tagline is "Contemporary Books and Poetry from the Independent Author," and it appears to be a site that lets you *give away* PDF ebooks.

Which is to say: There are books there. They're free. A blurb on why you should self-publish has a piece about the fact that you don't have to pay up-front, but then has this response to "But I Want to Make Money from My Book":

The publishing industry is not set up that way. They are setup to make the money first and then after you have sold a 1,000 copies of your book you can start receiving a small percentage. Most publishers want you to pay hundreds of dollars up-front to agree to publish your book. Additionally, you will most likely have to pay for cover art,

placement, promotional campaigns, table placement at book fairs, etc.. By the time all is done, you will have entered in to a part-time job promoting your book, and have had given thousands to your publisher before ever making \$1 back from them.

Why hassle with all that? Publishing your book should be liberating, not burdensome. Let The Author's Community Self-Publishing Press do it all for you, getting your book in the hands of readers, freeing yourself to write you next book. After all isn't that the point of it anyway?

Um. No. "Most publishers" who want you to pay up front are vanity presses. Real publishers do not ask authors to pay "hundreds of dollars up front."

For that matter, the submission guidelines are restrictive: Not only must submissions be PDF, they must be 8.5" x 11" PDFs, insuring that they won't be ideally designed for tablets and ebook readers (where a 6" x 9" page is far more suitable). (They do allow A4 or A5 page sizes; that's no help.)

Pages link to "World Public Library," [a site](#) that appears to have precisely the same content but with "World Public Library" as a header and this remarkably arrogant tagline: "Where the World Goes to Read."

When I go to look for which books are most popular, it won't show me—but it does show me books "most popular in Contra Costa," which is not where I live. The most popular books for this pair of sites?

➤ *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* by Martin Luther

➤ *Sextus Empiricus and Greek Scepticism* by Mary Mills Patrick

The category list on the side appears to include Project Gutenberg and lots of other free ebook sources.

As a source of free ebooks? Maybe...but I'd probably go to the Internet Archive.

As a preferred method for self-publishing ebooks? *Really?*

PS: Lulu, which will allow you to actually, you know, make a few bucks from your books, *with no upfront costs and starting with the very first copy*, will also serve up free ebooks, if that's what you want to do. You can even make the ebook free and charge for a print version: I do that for *Open Access and Libraries*, for example.

Ignore the Doomsayers: The Book Industry Is Actually Adapting Well

Peter Osnos provides this commentary [on October 23, 2012](#) at *The Atlantic*. Osnos notes the profusion of high-profile Fall books in 2012 and says:

Whatever else may be happening in this tumultuous period of transition in how books are produced and distributed, the sheer range and quality of so many titles is indisputable proof that our marketplace has writers and readers in impressive numbers.

For all the complexities that publishing faces, the notion that books are somehow less of a factor in the cultural or information ecosystem of our time doesn't hold up to the evidence.

He's partly taking on [a Guardian gloom-and-doom essay](#) cast as a set of prescriptions to *save* publishing, among them cut down the number of titles (and specifically make it even *tougher* for new writers to get published), switch entirely to print-on-demand and keep prices high. Osnos also links to [a response](#) by Jeremy Greenfield (published at *Forbes*) who notes:

The publishing industry isn't a monolithic thing: some publishers are doing well and others are not. But if it were a monolithic thing, it would be pretty healthy right now. According to the [latest stats from the Association of American Publishers](#), sales across the entire book industry were up about 7% through May of this year versus the first five months of last year. Across trade publishing (most books you see in bookstores), sales were up about 15%.

Further, a pattern we've been observing at some of the largest publishers that report their earnings is [flat sales but an increased profit margin](#).

These two data points, taken separately and together, suggest that publishing is thriving and, further, smaller and medium-sized publishers have more sales this year than last.

I don't see an industry that's flailing — I see one that's managing a complicated transition much better than would be expected.

It's fair to say Greenfield disagrees with much of the gloom-and-doom manifesto, noting (among other things) that print on demand is far more expensive for most book runs and that roughly one-third of books are still sold through retail bookstores. "So, publishers that want to ignore a third of their potential market should probably follow this advice."

Back to Osnos...he offers a little more commentary, basically making the point that publishers are in fact dealing with the situation fairly well. I'm on record as saying that I'd *love* to see the Big Five become less important in book publishing—not disappear, but become a smaller chunk of a more varied marketplace. I don't know whether that's happening, and I do know that the Big Five seem to make lots of stupid moves (e.g., DRM, dealing with libraries on ebooks), but they do seem to be adapting.

Mark Coker's 2013 Book Publishing Industry Predictions—Indie Ebook Authors Take Charge

This [massive December 21, 2012 post](#) by Mark Coker at *Smashwords* is a case where I'm not sure it even makes sense to excerpt and discuss. Not because Coker's either wrong or right (he will probably turn out to be a

little of both), but because it's such a long list of well-discussed predictions that I'm inclined to just point you there.

It is long—not as long as this roundup, to be sure, but very long for a blog post. There are 21 predictions. Each has several paragraphs of commentary. For that matter, the introduction is a reasonably long post.

Will ebook sales for 2013 actually be 45% of total trade books? Will total ebooks sold exceed total print books sold? Dunno (and maybe don't care). Will the current "glut of books" become a bigger glut? Almost certainly, partly thanks to Smashwords.

I like his version of my comment that the Big Traditional Publishers aren't really book publishers anymore—they're product pushers. He puts it this way: "Publishers are in the business of selling books, not publishing books." I think that's specifically true of the Big Five, and less true for smaller publishers—e.g., I even believe the fairly large Chronicle Books is in the business of finding, creating and publishing books they care about, not just whatever will move the most units.

Loads of stuff here, all of it well-argued. I won't even mention some of the other predictions I either agree with, disagree with or have no idea about—there's just too much here.

Also 95 comments, which I did not read.

But Wait! There's More!

This roundup is an experiment: To avoid wasting paper and printer ink, I did *not* follow my usual practice of printing the first page of each cited article, arranging the pages, typically splitting them into subdivisions and working from there.

Instead, I worked through the one big clump of items tagged "eb-marketplace," creating divisions as I went. Almost immediately, I saw that two subsections would be large enough that I should defer them, so I retagged some items "eb\$" (Pricing) or "ebsales" (Sales). I also tagged "ebsoft" (ebook software) and "ebhistory" but those turned out not to be large groups. And, of course, I've mentioned the Pricing section more than once in this essay. So where's the Pricing section?

Delayed, that's where it is. There are 20 items tagged for that, along with 14 for sales. There are also a bunch of eb- tags I want to look at in addition to eb-libraries (just under 100 and likely to be delayed for a while) and eb-vs-pb (that is, ebooks and print books: 47 items). And this roundup is already longer than I'd like.

So there will almost certainly be a Part 2 next month, incorporating (cross fingers) general essays, history and futurism, pricing, sales, software and *maybe* how ebooks do and don't relate to print books. With the usual caveat: Gaia willing and the creek don't rise, and I don't get too discouraged about things to continue.

The Back

This time around, THE BACK mixes some stuff that could go in THE MIDDLE with some earlier snark-worthy items. A few of these items are sort of a farewell to a magazine I read for 31 years (*thirty-one years!*), one that's now disappeared into the online-only ether, where it's really no longer a magazine.

Chromebook Exile?

The May 2012 *PC World* (yes, that's the not-so-dearly departed) has a so-so review of the \$1,449 Chromebook Pixel (gorgeous 2560x1700 pixel display, 3.35lb., which seems heavy for what's essentially a browser, 64GB solid-state storage, 3-hour battery life). The concluding paragraph may be more optimistic about the future of Chrome as *the way to do all your computing* than I would be, but it's still a three-star review:

As an idea, the Chromebook Pixel has a lot going for it. But as a product, it's simply not practical yet. For the time being, it's just an expensive curiosity.

It's the sidebar that earns inclusion here: "How I Survived Chromebook Exile," in which Melissa Riofrio "spent a week living off the Chromebook Pixel as much as I could." Riofrio's take is that millions of people "have *already* discarded PCs, using their tablets and even smartphones for many common computing tasks"—and that, for these people, Chromebooks offer "a more functional alternative for living the increasingly typical online life." So there it is: Once you've decided to scrap that \$500 notebook or PC, a \$1,450 device that costs more than most notebooks is what you really need, not your \$600 tablet or, what, \$250 smartphone. Or, ahem, you could keep using a \$500 notebook or PC. Or even a \$1,450 one—you can get some sweet notebooks for that price. Heck, if you're an Apple fancier, well-equipped Macbook Airs go for less than \$1,450. (Riofrio says it's "missing the point" to compare a Chromebook Pixel to a full-fledged Windows laptop. I don't buy that, and the sidebar surely doesn't make the case. My point: If you've decided not to use a laptop for computing, *a \$1,449 laptop that's cloud-dependent and has mediocre battery life* is not going to be your device of choice.)

As to the "exile," Riofrio admits that she had to use various workarounds to make this work at all, but loved it.

101 Greatest Websites

I'm seeing the term "listicles" used for "articles" composed of lists, and it's not a bad term. Listicles are lazy journalism, appealing to those who

don't want to read more than a paragraph at a time and avoiding the need for coherent organization or summary. *PC World* was always list-heavy and has become more so. At least this thirteen-page feature (two-thirds of the editorial space that's not reviews or column-equivalents) doesn't call these "sites you need." Instead, "101 Greatest Websites You've Never Heard Of" says they're worth discovering.

Or not. Especially that article title. I don't visit that many websites but I'd heard of roughly half of those in the first section. And I'm not sure steering more people to Prezi is such a great thing...nor am I wild about recommending a book recommendation site controlled by big publishers. But hey, it's just a listicle, not to be taken seriously.

Coming Attractions

That's the name for a multipage feature in each *Home Theater* issue that touts hot new items with lots of pictures, very little text and no actual reviews—these may not be ads, but they serve the same function. I frequently find them amusing, such as the four-page version in the May 2013 issue. It touts a \$2,200 soundbar and a \$1,595 headphone amplifier, as well as a \$3,000 "wireless music system" (a 19"-wide stereo amplifier/speaker combo that gets its music via Apple AirPlay) and some devices that may actually offer value.

The magazine used to have a decent humor column on the final page. Now, that seems to be the home of "Premiere Design," sometimes a source of apparently *unintended* humor—as, for example, in September 2013, when the featured product is the Symbol Audio Modern Record Console. It's a stereo console; the article calls it a "sophisticated update of the classic hi-fi console." You're not going to get *enormously* wide stereo images, as the whole thing's only 66" wide (18.25" deep, 34.75" tall, but most of that height's a steel pedestal containing a subwoofer). The speakers are "unassuming" 6.5" single drivers—driven by a tube-based 15 watt per channel amplifier. Oh, and there's a turntable, of course. But also a preamp allowing for Wi-Fi based media streaming. And it's in a solid walnut cabinet. The price for this oddity? A mere \$26,500.

It's Magic!

Just a little potshot at "Sam's Space" in the May 2013 *Stereophile*, specifically Sam Tellig's informal review of the \$970 Promitheous Audio Reference TVC4 passive preamplifier. (What's a passive preamplifier? One that doesn't preamplify. It's an input switch and volume control.)

I'm not attacking the TVC4 itself. I am taking on one section of the review, and specifically a three-word parenthetical phrase. Remember that the TVC4 is a strictly electronic device. Here's the section that got to me:

The cabinet is quite beautiful: Malaysian merbau (*Intsia bijuga*) hardwood, which is an endangered species and, of course, affects the sound. (It has to.)

So wrapping up electronics in wood *has to* affect the sound quality? Really? And, of course, it's beautiful that the non-preamp helps to make an endangered species even *more* endangered. Heck, why not carve the case out of an elephant tusk?

Tellig doesn't recommend the TVC4. He thinks you need to kick in \$7,800 for a non-preamp. But that's *Stereophile*.

Think \$7,800 is an awful lot to pay for a preamp that doesn't even preamplify? Michael Fremer writes a laudatory review in the June 2013 issue of the TAD C600 line preamplifier ("line preamplifier" means it doesn't preamplify phono cartridges—in a way, it's also a non-amplifying preamp, although it probably does offer some amplification). TAD is high-end Pioneer. This little gem costs \$42,000. It gets the magazine's cover. As well it should, for that price.

Quality Control

Immediately following Tellig's column is Michael Fremer's "Analog Corner," in praise of all things vinyl. This time, he's reviewing an \$8,500 phono cartridge. Along the way, we learn that "retipping" a predecessor cartridge—after 1,000 hours or so, it was losing performance—cost "a few thousand dollars, close to [its] original price of \$4,200." But that's not even the story. Nope. The new cartridge *didn't work right*—because the factory used incompatible chemicals within it. So the factory sent a new copy. It wasn't quite right either.

Fremer says his experience was "clearly an aberration" and calls the failure of *two out of three* \$8,500 cartridges "a few production hiccups." (No, this isn't some strange little startup company—it's Ortofon, which has been in the stylus business for some 70 years and is apparently the world's largest suppliers of phono cartridges.)

Clearly I'm old fashioned. If I pay half the price of a new car for a phono cartridge, I'd expect the damn thing to work right, first time, every time. (I also might not expect to have to budget \$4 per record played so I could keep it in working order, but I'm not the target market anyway.)

Inevitability?

I was reading the May 2013 *American Libraries*—belatedly as usual—and encountered an interesting article with an unfortunate opening. The article: "Libraries 'Cache' In on Geocaching Treasure Hunts"—by Alan NaPier at Liverpool (N.Y.) Public Library. The opening sentence:

As physical collections shrink in response to the digital revolution, most libraries are looking for ways to keep the turnstile spinning.

Say what? Are most public library physical collections—and, presumably, circulation—shrinking rapidly? Are libraries really “looking for ways to keep the turnstile spinning”?

So I had to look—at Liverpool and at the nation as a whole, comparing 2009 to 2011 (the latest figures). Liverpool has indeed shrunk its physical collection—the bookstock was down 19% from 2009 to 2011. “In response to the digital revolution”? That’s a little harder to demonstrate. Circulation was down 6.5%; patron visits were down 5.7%. Nationally, meanwhile, there was—to my surprise—an overall drop in book collections (OK, what with active weeding programs and little money for acquisitions, maybe so), but it amounted to 2.6% over two years, not 19%. Meanwhile, patron visits were down 4%...and circulation was ~~down~~, oops, *up* 1.2%.

I think my immediate response was best summed up by the title of Meredith Farkas’ column for that issue: “Spare Me the Hype Cycle.” For most public libraries, I believe, “the digital revolution” is hype. Physical collections continue to be vital to serving the community, augmented with lots of other things. As to Farkas’ column: It’s excellent, and if you haven’t already read it you should. As with most everything in *American Libraries* these days, [you can read it for free online](#).

Clean Up Your System

This one’s a quarter-page ad I’ve seen in *PC World* and elsewhere—and it’s a mystery. The big claim is in quotes, “Clean Up Your System And Really Lose The Weight”—and the two paragraphs that follow are amusing, although they surely didn’t convince me to send that check or money order for \$21.95.

Did I say two paragraphs? I mean two sentences, although calling either of these sentences is probably language abuse all on its own. Capitalization is frequent and somewhat random, there are quotes around early material—actually one open quote followed by close quotes at two different places—but none where they appear to be needed. Line breaks seem to be as random as capitalization, including two cases in the second paragraph with one short word isolated on a line. Here’s just one excerpt—from the middle of the second sentence-like construction: “The Shipping Was Free, all I did Was To Follow The simple Instructions, And Walla Look At Me Now A whole Lot Lighter” Walla indeed. Heck, I’d say it twice!

Unfortunately, the mystery publisher’s not in Walla Walla. It’s in Fresno.

21 Worst Tech Habits

Another *PC World* listicle, this time from the June 2013 issue and it's a mere ten pages (beginning with the apparently mandatory two-page photo spread). Some of the "habits" and how to break them make sense. Some are triumphs of universalism, for example "Everyone uses their phones everywhere." Some are just strange, such as the flat-out assertion that "Printing Anything" is a bad habit and questioning that anything "legitimately" needs to be printed. Because, you know, reasons.

"We all love our smartphones" (there it is again: *if you don't own a smartphone you shouldn't be reading PC World*), but "using them in the company of others, particularly at mealtime, is just plain rude." I'll agree with that. Not quite as rude as insisting that nobody should print anything or that *everybody* does what you do, but still rude.

Can't Live Without: Back Again

Here's that magic phrase again, on the cover of the July 2013 *PC World*: "Best Free Stuff: Sites, services, Apps and Tools You Can't Live Without." (Emphasis added.) Let's see: Two-page illustration spread, followed by eight pages of text and lots of illustrations. It is, as you might have guessed, another listicle.

What can't you live without? AirDroid, an Android file transfer facility. Solutio, a Windows remote maintenance program. HandBrake to convert DVDs and Blu-ray discs to digital formats—and yes, they *do* recommend another freebie if you're having trouble violating DMCA. A whole flock of music services, 'cuz you *can't live without* them all.

Prezi, of course. How did people ever live without the clarity and calm of Prezi? Cardmunch for iOS, a business card muncher. Alto Mail from AOL. And more. All of which you Can't Live Without.

Another listicle in the July issue is worse: "12 PC Technologies That Need to Disappear." Some of these dirty dozen may make sense—PATA, for example. But optical drives? *Really?*

Great Speakers: Name Your Price

Much as I love to poke at extreme prices in the high-end audio industry, especially when those extreme prices seem to be coupled with lack of quality control or merits that only a few can sense, I've always been reluctant to say much about speaker prices (or, for that matter, phono cartridge prices if the cartridges pass QC), because transducers—the devices that translate electrical to physical or vice-versa—will *never* be perfect and can, I believe, always be improved. That I would never buy \$100,000-pair speakers, even if I won SuperLotto and had room for them (where "never" is modified by "assuming lack of hyperinflation") doesn't mean they're not entirely valid purchase decisions for others.

So I found three successive full-length speaker reviews (including measurements) in the July 2013 *Stereophile* interesting as a set of data points. All three reviews are *very* positive—and the measured performance was excellent in each case.

- First, there's the YG Acoustics Sonja 1.3, big (70" x 17" x 28"), heavy (506lbs—no, that's not 50.6), aluminum-cabinet speaker systems, each of which has five drivers (one tweeter, two midrange, two woofers, all but the tweeter aluminum-cone). They're apparently first-rate. They cost \$106,800 a pair.
- Next, there's the TAD Evolution One, which also get a rave review and show great measurements. In other words, they're also apparently first-rate. They're also fairly big (45.5" x 13" x 20"), fairly heavy (but a mere 118.8lb.), but this time made of wood, with four speakers in each cabinet. TAD is the upscale division of Pioneer: note that for the next bullet. These speakers are much less expensive, but still not precisely bargain basement: \$29,800 a pair. The reviewer calls the speaker "marvelous" and "found no fault with it."
- Finally there's the Pioneer SP-BS22-LR, from the division of Pioneer that calls itself Pioneer. This speaker is a bit smaller (12 9/16" x 7 1/8" x 8 7/16"), a bit lighter (9lb. 2oz.), has only two drivers (a tweeter and a "woofer," but a 4" woofer ain't gonna reach the bottom octaves) and has a wood-grain vinyl finish on its cabinet. The speaker goes down to about 70Hz, which is remarkably good for the woofer size. The reviewer calls it "a stunning achievement" and its sound "balanced, neutral, and involving, with no significant shortcomings." It is, by the way, designed by the same person who designed the TAD Evolution One. The price? \$159.99 a pair.

I'm nearly certain both of the first two speakers are worth their prices to some well-to-do audiophiles. What's remarkable here is that third speaker.

So Long, Old Mag

Here's the August 2013 *PC World*. I didn't mark anything in it as being worth noting or snarking about. The longest article is—guess what?—a listicle, a whole bunch of "quick fixes" for perceived PC issues.

What's noteworthy here is that the magazine, which has been slimming down over the years (with, to my mind, even more "slimming" of worthwhile in-depth material than of overall pages), has achieved the ultimate slimming. It's gone.

Oh, the publisher claims there's still a *PC World* magazine and didn't offer to refund subscriptions (but when I cancelled my auto-renewed

subscription, the remaining issue on this year's run was refunded). But now you get the "PCWorld of the Digital Age." The editorial casts it as a wonderful new world of increased flexibility and multimedia capabilities, accessible either as an iPad or Kindle or Android app or as a PC edition, and one that saves "critical shelf space."

Another way to put it is that *PC World* has ceased to exist, much as *PC Magazine* did a couple of years back. There's a digital thingie, but I question whether it's really a magazine—there's something about a print package that's hard to match in an online collection of articles, columns and stuff. (The website might be great. But it's a website. I never found *Slate* or *Salon* satisfactory as magazines—and although I read the *San Francisco Chronicle* on my Kindle Fire HD 8.9 at the same time and in the same order I used to read the print newspaper, it's only marginally "the same thing.")

At one point, I believe I subscribed to something like eight different computer-related magazines, maybe more. I was sad when *Creative Computing* shut down—and that was in 1984, about a year after *PC World* (and, later, *PC Magazine*) emerged. I'm less sad about *PC World*—the last of my computer magazines, at least for now—disappearing. For a magazine lover and PC enthusiast—or now, I guess PC user—that's odd. I remember the massive fortnightly issues of *PC Magazine*'s glory years. I remember the absurd *Computer Shopper* issues (*huge* beasts, oversize and thick); I even remember the Mac-oriented magazines I subscribed to in order to get a broader view.

Just as there are still auto magazines for enthusiasts (quite a few of them, actually), there are still PC magazines for enthusiasts. I guess I'm not really an enthusiast any more. I can live with that.

The Meme Meme

Remember when "meme" actually meant something? Such as, say, "an idea, behavior, or style that spreads from person to person within a culture." (That's by Scott Atran as quoted in the pretty good Wikipedia article "[Meme](#).")

On the internet it's become shorthand for something else—especially the idea that a meme is a common photo with lots of different captions overlaid. Lolcats for cultural ideas, I suppose. Which all leads up to: If you still find memes amusing (which I do intermittently), you might want to check out [First World Problems](#). Or not.

Yes, I see that the site's actually part of the problem—offering a "meme generator" so you can prepare your own "meme." So it goes.

Why Word Must Die

Before citing the actual article and providing a link, I'm going to quote from one of the hundreds of comments, since it probably says most of what needs to be said about so many "must die" and "DO IT THIS WAY" articles:

This essay is written from the POV of someone who mostly writes blog posts, or works for publications that have their own platforms, and expects Word to do something that - indeed - it was not built to do. You err in the assumption that your needs represent the needs of everyone in "today's media environment." Actually, Word meets most people's needs just fine. [Emphasis added.]

Let's broaden that: Everybody else is not necessarily you. But internalizing that realization would put so many pundits, tech journalists, Farhad Manjoo wannabes and others out of business that...gee, that sounds sort of good.

The article, as it happens, appeared in *Slate*—which, until late 2004, was owned by Microsoft. It's by Tom Scocca and appeared on April 11, 2012. The title: "[Death to Word](#)." Some of the "archaic habits" Scocca despises and uses as reasons that Word should go away? Smart quotes. Superscript ordinals (e.g., 25th). Automatic em dashes such as the one in the first sentence of this paragraph. Clippy. (Oh, that's right, Clippy hasn't been around for a long time.)

Scocco basically says publishing is done on the web and Word isn't a great HTML editor. The latter is certainly true, although Word's Save as Filtered HTML is nowhere near as bad as Scocco makes Word's HTML output to be (and Word's "create blog post" works remarkably well).

It's a rant—and a rant that only works if you assume *everything* is going to become a webpage. Say, here's a complaint, Tom: How come *Slate* insists on breaking a short article over two pages (I know: so I can look at *more ads*)—and then, when you click on Page 2, *shows you the whole article starting at the top*? Isn't that stupid, user-hostile design? Or is it OK because it's on the web?

One of Scocca's Big Points is that a simple file in Word turned into several pages of HTML code when pasted into a page deliberately designed to capture all such code. Avner Shabar-Kashtan was intrigued by this and did some Show Source on Scocca's article:

I counted over 400 lines in this page's HTML code, before we even got to the beginning of this text. 400 lines, just to make this website appear as you want it to - and that's not even counting all the javascript and CSS files that are linked to from the document header - one of those, described as "Slate CSS", is over 4,500 lines long!

How many gremlins hidden in those nooks and crannies? But do you care? No, you don't, and you shouldn't. Because they're invisible, as

they should be. And likewise all those blobs of XML you scraped out of your Word file, those "hidden codes". They're hidden for a reason, because they're not for you, they're for Word. Just like the CSS (8 pages? Hah!) is for your browser, not you.

I was also intrigued by Scocca's "eight pages of code to yield a two-word output" and did a similar test, this time saving the file as Filtered HTML. Scocca says he got over 16,000 characters of stuff; I got around 6,000, but that's because my default template has a fair number of styles. In fact, virtually all of the extra stuff is CSS—font and style definitions. Once you get past the CSS, here's what you find—all of it (except the closing `</html>`):

```
<body lang=EN-US>
<div class=WordSection1>
<p class=MsoNormal>the Word</p>
</div>
</body>
```

I also thought it would be interesting to see just how much extra crap Word adds in if you use it to create a blog post—which it can now do directly to any Wordpress or Blogger blog, and yes, that's how I do my old-movie review posts (I copy a section of the Word document, do a New blog post, paste and post as draft.)

Here's what I got when I just typed "the Word" into a new Blog post screen in Word and published to Walt at Random as a draft—copied and pasted directly from the Wordpress text view:

```
<p>the Word</p>
```

Shocking. Look at all that wasted overhead!

OK, I'm biased. Hell, I use Word to produce books, and it's *clearly* unsuitable for that. Easy, workable, effective, but unsuitable, I guess. I also use it for lots of other purposes—including some blog posts that are likely to take more than 15 minutes to do, because as good as Wordpress' current WYSIWYG mode is, Word is better. Even if the results do wind up on a webpage.

To directly build and edit webpages? I use an HTML editor, currently BlueGriffon. I have mixed feelings about it—and find that I have to work in source mode much of the time to get things right.

Incidentally: My wife uses Notepad. A lot. Because, for the web-based work she does, the copying-and-pasting is more straightforward. Do note that Microsoft includes Notepad and Wordpad as part of Windows. It doesn't assume you should use Word for *everything*.

Also incidentally: Remember my earlier little rant about web magazines not really functioning well as magazines? I give you *Slate* as another example. It never did function as a magazine; it used to be an interesting collection of frequently good articles. There are still some good ones now and then, but it's getting harder and harder to sift them out of

the “let’s publish extreme statements on every side of an issue and see if the truth emerges” approach.

One of today’s four featured banner articles? “Teachers are better if they have kids of their own: Why hiring young and childless teachers is a mistake.” Great. Especially since the article seems to say only *experienced teachers* should be hired as, you know, teachers. (I skimmed the article; I may have that wrong.) Maybe *Slate*’s new role is to make *Huffington Post* look reasonable by comparison? (Shortly after writing this, I deleted the *Slate* bookmark from my daily-visit section. A wise decision.)

What Your Klout Score Really Means

Since I’m still in catchup mode in *The Back*, I’m going to go back to one of those fish-filled barrels I’ve pretty much sworn off: *Wired*—in this case [Seth Stevenson’s April 24, 2012 article](#) (see title above). In this case I’m not so much poking fun at Stevenson as hoping desperately that the dystopian near-future Klout’s honchos assert hasn’t already happened and won’t.

The piece begins with an experienced consultant being recruited for a VP position and turned down because he didn’t know what Klout was—and had a 34 score. They hired a 67.

If Stevenson’s right, the present’s bad enough, with Las Vegas casinos looking up guests’ Klout scores as they check in and upgrading rooms for some high scorers. Here’s what Matt Thompson of Klout hopes to see:

Soon, he predicts, people with formidable Klout will board planes earlier, get free access to VIP airport lounges, stay in better hotel rooms, and receive deep discounts from retail stores and flash-sale outlets. “We say to brands that these are the people they should pay attention to most,” Thomson says. “How they want to do it is up to them.”

Krap. That’s about all I can really say.

(I just checked. I’m a 41, which is apparently pond scum. Stevenson was a 31—but he raised that to 46 after a Klout exec told him how to game, er, use the system.)

My grump here is mostly about Klout as another “the rich get richer” scheme—but I think it’s worth noting Stevenson’s own reaction after he added a plugin that showed him Klout scores alongside tweets:

At first, I marveled at the folks with scores soaring up into the seventies and eighties. These were the “important” people—big media personalities and pundits with trillions of followers. But after a while I noticed that they seemed stuck in an echo chamber that was swirling with comments about the few headline topics of the social media moment, be it the best zinger at the recent GOP debate or that nutty New York Times story everybody read over the weekend.

Over time, I found my eyes drifting to tweets from folks with the lowest Klout scores. They talked about things nobody else was talking about. Sitcoms in Haiti. Quirky museum exhibits. Strange movie-theater lobby cards from the 1970s. The un-Kloutiest's thoughts, jokes, and bubbles of honest emotion felt rawer, more authentic, and blissfully oblivious to the herd. Like unloved TV shows, these people had low Nielsen ratings—no brand would ever bother to advertise on their channels. And yet, these were the people I paid the most attention to. They were unique and genuine. That may not matter to marketers, and it may not win them much Klout. But it makes them a lot more interesting.

Since I just grumped about *Slate's* idiot way of handling multipage articles, I should note that, at least for this one (three pages), *Wired's* site does two things right:

- There's a "View all" link to turn it into a single long page.
- If you go to Page 2, *the page starts at page 2*, not back at the top of a now-longer Page 1.

The first commenter notes that the automated Twitter account for Big Ben (it tweets a "bong" for every hour of the day) has a Klout score of 69; it's influential about drugs. But that was a year ago... (For what it's worth, my "topics" appear to be Libraries, Books and Writing. I can't complain. In the two weeks between first writing this item and editing it, my Klout declined from 42 to 41. I won't complain about that either.)

Instagram Musings

This one's more typically *Wired*—by "Wired.com photo department" [on May 4, 2012](#), entitled "Why Instagram Is Terrible for Photographers, and Why You Should Use It." It came out around the time Facebook paid \$1 billion for Instagram.

The reasons Instagram is bad for professional photographers are mostly but not entirely obvious—a rights issue, poor photo quality, the silliness of the art filters and being a repository for cute animals.

Then we get the *Wired* spin, why you should *love this high-tech wonder regardless*. The rights issue is only theoretical. The quality is good enough. "Maybe art filters do make the world look better."

Maybe. Used selectively. Or maybe they make so many photos look so similarly arty that, after a while, they become effectively invisible. I'm not sure.

Coherent Discussion

Here's one [from May 7, 2012](#) that's worth remembering: "Anti-climate science group 'experiments' with billboard trolling," by John Timmer at *ars technica*.

Yep. A billboard on I-280 in suburban Chicago with a big picture of Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, and this text in huge red letters: "I still believe in Global Warming. Do you?" Under that, in white letters on a red background: www.heartland.org

I believe I've heard a spokesperson from Heartland Institute, one of those outfits that lately makes "think tank" an oxymoronic phrase, nattering on about either how evil Obamacare is or how there's no such thing as global warming. Timmer reminds us of background:

Prior to this spring, the Heartland Institute was a relatively obscure think tank that was primarily known for organizing an annual conference of people who take issue with mainstream climate science. That changed when an environmental researcher [tricked the group](#) into sending him internal documents, setting off a public drama that ended up leaving both parties worse off (Heartland lost sponsors, while the researcher had to resign a number of his positions).

So now Heartland's putting up billboards before its anti-science—oh, sorry, skeptical--conference. According to its own PR, it planned to replace the Unabomber with Charles Manson, Fidel Castro and possibly Osama bin Laden. In the interests of informed debate, presumably. But that didn't happen:

Instead, the campaign was stopped after 24 hours as prominent conference speakers threatened to cancel and a number of the Institute's financial backers threatened to depart.

Timmer includes a juicy paragraph from the press release:

How did Heartland justify the comparison between murderers and tyrants and anyone who believed in global warming? "Because what these murderers and madmen have said differs very little from what spokespersons for the United Nations, journalists for the 'mainstream' media, and liberal politicians say about global warming," according to the [press release](#) that announced the ads. It went on to claim that "[t]he people who still believe in man-made global warming are mostly on the radical fringe of society."

There's a lot more in the article. Heartland also doesn't believe second-hand smoke is an issue. Worth reading!

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Masthead

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