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Crawford at Large

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The Front

Readership Notes, 2017

Through 6:30 a.m. on December 31, 2017, the *Cites & Insights* website had 134,804 visits (and supposedly 94,315 unique visitors, but that looks suspiciously like the sum of each month's 6,000-8,000 unique visitors).

The most-downloaded 2017 issues were:

- 17.1 [GRAY OPEN ACCESS JOURNALS 2012-2016], 2,051 downloads
- 17.3 [THE ART OF THE BEALL and LIBRARIES AND COMMUNITIES], 1,931 downloads
- 17.2 [TECHNOLOGY and THE BACK], 1,604 downloads.

Four issues cluster between 1,037 and 1,074 downloads each. Three issues trail far behind:

- 17.9 [GRAY OA 2014-2017], 541 downloads
- 17.4 [GOAJ2 Chapters 1-7], 494 downloads
- 17.10 [GRAY PORTRAITS and FACEBOOK], 229 downloads.

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Of course, 17.10 had only been out for a few weeks—but 18.1 had more downloads in the last 11 days of December than 17.10 has had to date.

Including older issues, including downloads since October 2013 (but, as always, about 2.3% low since most of the last day of each month doesn't get counted), here are the six issues with more than 7,000 downloads each:

- 14.4 [ETHICS AND ACCESS: THE SAD CASE OF JEFFREY BEALL], 19,608 downloads
- 14.7 [JOURNALS, "JOURNALS" AND WANNABES]: 10,325 downloads

- 10.8 [five essays including one on Facebook], 9,639 downloads
- 6.10 [LOOKING AT LIBLOGS: THE GREAT MIDDLE], 8,859 downloads
- 12.2 [SOCIAL NETWORKS and three others], 7,654 downloads
- 8.7 [six essays], 7,076 downloads.

In all, there have been more than 616,000 downloads between October 2013 and December 2017. Seventeen issues have been downloaded at least 5,000 times; 41 at least 4,000 times; 76 at least 3,000 times; and 131 at least 2,000 times (all counts combine two-column and one-column versions for the years in which there were such versions—but all count *ignore* the single-article downloads from the years such downloads were available).

No pre-2017 issues show fewer than 1,000 downloads; the lowest of those at 1,024 is 4.5, devoted to the Broadcast Flag, a topic that's just a wee bit dated.

Technology

Wikipedia: Oldish Notes

The most recent *C&I* essay on *Wikipedia* appeared nine years ago, in the [January 2009 Cites & Insights](#). I stopped tracking commentaries a couple of years later; as a result, all but one of the items below are at least five years old and quite possibly dated. Somehow, though, I had 36 tagged items, and thought it might be worth noting some of them that are still around. Maybe it's nostalgia for the days when you could actively say *Wikipedia* was terribly flawed and the “Neutral Point of View” was largely laughable, without being labeled a Luddite crank. I am still acutely aware that *Wikipedia* has a set of “rules” that apply if the Editors don't make exceptions (e.g., blogs aren't evidence—except when they are) and that I'm not masochistic or brave enough to once more try my hand at improving it.

No subheadings or attempt at overall coherence as I clean out this particular cubbyhole; mostly stuff in chronological order, mostly from 2010-2013. Possibly useful at this date, possibly all outdated. I'm leaving out one “controversy” involving adult content, Faux News and Jimbo Wales, Jimbo himself and his work to erase Larry Sanger from cofounder status, and probably other one-time controversies that have gone by the wayside.

Wikipedia and Inherent Open Source Bias

That's Dan, writing [on May 26, 2010](#) at *Contentini*.

Should you ever highlight poor writing or errors on Wikipedia, you'll likely hear the retort, “*change it then!*”, in reference to the open-to-all technology. Layered on top of this technology – which, it should be said, is not particularly friendly to the average user – are a complex set of community and

individual processes, checks and etiquette. Taking these things into account, how easy is it to actually make a change on Wikipedia?

This article will examine the question by analyzing recent activity to the [List of Content Management Systems](#) English Wikipedia page. A short disclaimer and conflict of interest should be noted: until April 2010, I was director of a company that creates [a content management system](#), which is one of many affected by the activity discussed. Empirical evidence is therefore presented, where available, to discuss points as neutrally as possible. This is certainly not an anti-Wikipedia article; rather, an open discussion that I hope will inform positive changes to what has become an invaluable resource.

If you click through the first link, you'll see a problem with the *Wikipedia* list's title—to wit, the first sentence narrows the title's scope:

This is a list of notable [content management systems](#) that are used to organize and facilitate collaborative content creation.

“Notable”—the wildcard that allows so much odd to happen in *Wikipedia*, since it's up to The Editors to decide what's notable.

Dan considers 500 edits to the article between 9/23/2009 and 5/24/2010, and some significant changes in the extent of the list:

Previously (as of 23 September 2009), there were 40 unique products listed as “Proprietary” or related, and 92 as “Free and Open Source”. 500 edits later, the number of proprietary products dropped 70% to 12 products (28 less). Conversely, Open Source products dropped 4%, to 88 products (4 less).

There are a number of reasons why Wikipedia contributors/editors might remove an entry, but in this particular case, the vast majority of deletions are based on the [non-notability guideline](#). This 1,500 word guideline – which is annexed with 10 subject-specific additional notability guidelines – states that content doesn't necessarily need to be notable enough to have a stand-alone Wikipedia page to be included, but where a “[Stand Alone List](#)” is concerned (such as the Content Management System list in question), the Wikipedia editors may decide it is necessary to limit the length of the list.

Dan questions the non-notability of some of the proprietary software—and the notability of some of the open-source software. He also notes that all of the removals were made by two editors, both of whom elsewhere proclaim their devotion to open software.

Recognizing the highly-charged, politically-edged nature of open source advocacy, permitting two open source ‘avid believers’ to moderate a page that lists proprietary and open source software is the equivalent of having a list of fast food restaurants moderated entirely by vegans. Neutrality is

difficult. In some ways, the situation is horribly ironic: “conflict of interest” has been stamped onto many of the proprietary listings as a case for removal, but rarely do reputable Wikipedia moderators undergo the same scrutiny, or are made to answer for the same conflicts of interest.

These two users are not the problem, though: they are accomplished Wikipedia editors who have made thousands of edits. They deserve credit and thanks for the spare time they commit to improving the encyclopedia. Open source is not the issue either; it is responsible for most websites on the Internet – including this one – and deserves the fervent support it receives.

The problem stems from the lack of process that allows a narrow cross-section of users to moderate potentially contentious Wikipedia pages. The openness and anonymity that brings Wikipedia success also enables a certain degree of lack-of-scrutiny, coupled with self-certified autonomy. In theory, the wider community is responsible for decision-making, but the reality is page and niche-level micromanagement with great community deference to the self-built reputation of managers – in effect, an oligarchy.

Dan regards this as a general problem, especially given the fairly narrow profile of most *Wikipedia* contributors at the time: young and male. He’s mostly pro-*Wikipedia*, and wanted to see it more diverse and balanced. The comments are interesting.

Looking at the article in question, I note that it begins with a six-year-old warning:

The [factual accuracy](#) of parts of this article (those related to article) may be compromised due to out-of-date information. Please update this article to reflect recent events or newly available information. (May 2012)

The Talk page suggests that interest in maintaining the article pretty much disappeared after 2013. There are currently roughly 54 proprietary and 114 open source entries in the list. Does this mean the problems have been solved? I have no idea.

Despite changes, Wikipedia will still “fail within 5 years”

It’s always fun to look at unequivocal forecasts made a few years back, such as Eric Goldman’s assertion as reported in this Nate Anderson piece on [September 1, 2009](#) at *ars technica*.

We’ve got to give law professor Eric Goldman credit: the man sticks with his predictions. On December 5, 2005, he [made the startling claim](#) that Wikipedia would “fail within five years.” On December 5, 2006, Goldman [doubled down on his prediction](#), saying that Wikipedia “will fail in four years.” On December 5, 2007, Goldman [took to his blog once more](#) in order to ~~give Wikipedia three more years~~ write about eBay.

But don't think he's going soft on the idea of Wikipedia's coming implosion—Goldman has taken his idea on the lecture circuit for the last few years, a particularly stirring example of which [Ars covered earlier this year](#). And he continues to [bemoan the community's "xenophobia"](#) toward outsiders and newbie contributors.

All of which brings us to now, when Goldman has at last doffed his sandwich board of apocalyptic doom, exchanging it for an academic paper in which that doom is parceled out in Latinate diction and footnotes. Called "[Wikipedia's Labor Squeeze and its Consequences](#)," Goldman's paper conspicuously avoids both timelines and the charged rhetoric of "failure."

"I found that predicting Wikipedia's 'failure' produced very emotional responses that overwhelmed consideration of my argument's merits," he noted in a blog entry last week. "I still think my 2005 predictions look pretty good (using my self-selected definition of 'failure'), but I deliberately directed the article towards the 'why' rather than the 'when.'" (Or, as he told Ars this week, "I toned down some of the most inflammatory turns of phrases.")

You can read the rest yourself—and it should be clear that "fail" meant and means "can't *really* be edited by anyone, anywhere, at any time." I'll leave you with the final paragraph, and I find the last sentence especially interesting as regards maintaining credibility by partially locking down edits:

But the preservation of credibility this way comes at a huge cost. First, it means that Wikipedia *has* failed—at least when it comes to the original utopian idea of an encyclopedia that anyone, anywhere can edit at any time. Those days are behind us, says Goldman; that might not be a bad thing, but it does mean that Wikipedia's core talent pool now needs to solve the labor problem by finding new ways to reward those who donate so much time to the site—and do a better job welcoming newcomers.

Comments are interesting, starting with the first (copied verbatim):

If one defines failure by his metric, the Wikipedia failed years ago, circa 2006/7. From that point on it has been populated by an increasing number of people who's only interest is to argue about specifications they themselves argue into existence, adding nothing of substance, and making it much harder for real contributors to add anything. You can easily spot these people, they make more talkspace edits than mainspace.

Don't be fooled by the "low hanging fruit" argument, that all the easy stuff is done and that's why edits are dropping off. The Wikipedia is not even remotely "complete", which you can demonstrate within a few clicks down the rabbit-hole of your favorite quirky topic.

The good news is that the long-timers are still out there plugging away, improving the product. The bad news is that every time one of the us leaves, no-one replaces us.

A fair number of other comments worth noting, as well as the cheerleaders denouncing anyone for offering any criticism of the Miracle That is Wikipedia.

Jesus of Wikipedia

Speaking of miracles, this Chris Wilson article [from January 14, 2011](#) at *Slate* is still interesting and relevant, as it offers a brief history of the first ten years of the entry for Jesus. Excerpts:

Jesus had a quiet adolescence, reared by well-behaved editors. Users fiddled with sentences and paragraphs, expanding on references and adding a broader accounting of his role in the Judaic religions. He was briefly promoted to the “most central figure in Christianity,” but was restored to mere centrality in the next edit. The “Jews for Jesus” made a brief appearance on his page in August of 2002 but were [removed](#) with a polite explanation as to why. Wikipedia co-founder Larry Sanger occasionally ducked in to brush up little disputes.

Wikipedia Jesus was vandalized for the first time on Nov. 6, 2002, when an anonymous user [replaced the entire page](#) with the repeated phrase “bla bla is all I hear.” Jesus existed in such a state for five minutes before another user rescued him. In the new year, he got a photo. It was removed three days later...

There’s more, although it’s not a long article, and it closes with a recognition that fatigue set in early:

In 2006, [nearly 7,000 edits were made](#) to Jesus’ profile. In 2009 there are barely 1,000. Users will continue to polish his edges, but their work feels mostly done. Meanwhile, the vandals circle, waiting for the moment when that protection comes down.

The current entry is **Jesus**, not **Jesus Christ**, with the usual link to a disambiguation page. At the time the *Slate* piece was written, the Jesus article was 16,000 words long; at this writing, and excluding many linked articles, it’s around 22,000 words—but that includes 440 references, a long bibliography and 20-odd textual footnotes. As you might expect, the Talk page goes on longer than I was willing to read. As for declining levels of editorial activity, the first 500 revisions when checked on December 22, 2017 go back to January 8, 2017, so it appears that there might be around 600 edits this year.

Actually, [there’s a tool for that](#)—and it shows a total of 29,687 edits to date (by 6,977 editors), with 553 edits in the previous 365 days. The peak year for edits was 2006, and it’s been lower than 2,000 per year since 2008.

Ten years of guilty pleasures with Wikipedia

This article, by Matthew Lasar [on January 15, 2011](#) at *ars technica*, is just plain fun: some examples of what may be the best use of *Wikipedia*. That is, seeking out trivial facts and connections.

Forget YouTube; never mind E-Bay; screw the pornosphere; Wikipedia is my guilty pleasure on the 'Net. It's where I go to keep the vast cluttered basement office of half respectable pop culture that resides in my brain in some semblance of informed order...

As Wikipedia celebrates its tenth anniversary today, I'm expecting the usual objections. Some entries are biased or inaccurate, the chorus will complain—as opposed to [scholarly books](#), [respected newspapers](#), and [National Public Radio](#), which apparently never make errors. The organization has a chaotic internal life, which [periodically erupts](#) over issues like how porn and sexual images are handled—unlike the United States Congress, which never gets [bent out of shape](#) over these things.

Yeah, whatever. For me Wikipedia is a limitless compendium of tasty trivia about every middle-to-lowbrow book, movie, TV show, toy, and meal I've ever sampled.

Good stuff. The close:

What exactly is Wikipedia at ten years of age? Who knows. “Wikipedia is not a [soapbox](#), an [advertising platform](#), a [vanity press](#), an experiment in [anarchy](#) or [democracy](#), an [indiscriminate collection of information](#), or a web [directory](#),” the site's [About](#) page insists.

It is, however, a whole lot of guilty pleasure fun.

My only comment: there is no such thing as a guilty pleasure, unless you enjoy guilt. Comments are a mix of good, snark and stupid.

The Top 10 Reasons Students Cannot Cite or Rely On Wikipedia

It's interesting to read this [October 20, 2011](#) article by Mark E. Moran at *finding Dulcinea* (with the curious subhead “Librarian of the Internet”) and consider the extent to which it's true.

The ten reasons, without Moran's commentary:

10. You must never fully rely on *any* one source for important information.
9. You especially can't rely on something when you don't even know who wrote it.
8. The contributor with an agenda often prevails.
7. Individuals with agendas sometimes have significant editing authority.
6. Sometimes “vandals” create malicious entries that go uncorrected for months.

5. There is little diversity among editors.
4. The number of active Wikipedia editors has flatlined.
3. It has become harder for casual participants to contribute.
2. Accurate contributors can be silenced.
1. It says so on Wikipedia.

As to the site itself and the silly “Librarian of the Internet” claim, it’s hard to say much, and there seems to be little or no content more recent than February 2015—but the site’s still there.

Citizendium turns five, but the Wikipedia fork is dead in the water

This report by Timothy B. Lee, on [October 27, 2011](#) at *ars technica*, isn’t exactly an obituary for *Citizendium*—but it might as well be. For those with short memories, I wrote about *Citizendium* in 2006, 2007, 2008 (including an essay) and 2009; I thought it was an interesting notion, with issues.

Five years ago this month, Larry Sanger caused a stir when he launched a fork of Wikipedia, the site he helped create in 2001. Sanger believed Wikipedia had fatal weaknesses that could only be fixed by making a clean break from the past. He had devised a new editing process he hoped would allow his new site to eventually surpass the original.

It hasn’t turned out that way. After a burst of initial enthusiasm, the site plateaued and then began to steadily decline. The site now has fewer than 100 active members, with only about a dozen of them making edits on a typical day.

Lee talks to two people who have or had been involved with the project and offers some comments on what did and didn’t happen. Some of the comments also provide useful insights: not only was *Citizendium* unable to challenge the much larger *Wikipedia*, it had internecine issues that were probably worse than *Wikipedia*’s edit wars.

As to more recent history, I’ll quote the last three paragraphs of the *Wikipedia* article on *Citizendium* (oh, the irony), beginning with a quote from some crackpot who will never have an article in *Wikipedia*:

Library writer Walt Crawford noted in April 2009 that *Citizendium* appeared to be in an “extended lull”, with a constant rate of creation of new articles at around 13–14 per day and a decline in the number of active authors.^[60] In August 2009, Richard Waters wrote in the *Financial Times* technology blog: “At best, *Citizendium* could be called a qualified success. Launched in March 2007, as of August 2009 it had 11,810 articles – 2,999,674 fewer than the English-language version of *Wikipedia*.”^[61] Mathieu O’Neil, Principal Researcher at the Australian Department of Broadband, Communication and the Digital Economy, wrote in a March 2010 article on [crowdsourcing](#) that “new participants to *Wikipedia* know that their contributions will have a significant audience; becoming a

Wikipedia editor is trivial and instantaneous; since it lacks this immediate quality, Citizendium failed to attract the crowd”.^[62]

In March 2010 the project had 90 contributors who made at least one edit, with a core of 25 contributors who made more than 100 edits. [Median](#) word count dropped from 468 words per article in October 2007 to 151 in May 2010.^[63] In June 2010, the number of users making 1, 20 or 100 edits per month all were at their lowest point since the project went public in March 2007.^[63] By October 2011, only about a dozen members made edits on a typical day, and an *Ars Technica* headline called the Citizendium project “dead in the water”.^[2] In September 2015, only seven editors had been active in the previous 30 days.^[64] As of September 2017, there was an average of 5 edits made per day.

In November 2016, a referendum was held to abolish the governing Citizendium Charter and the Council in favor of Wikipedia-style discussion and consensus. It attracted nine votes, and was passed. A new Managing Editor was to be elected at the same time, but there were no nominations.^[65]

The site’s [still there](#)...and perhaps even more moribund, with 160 “approved” articles. Recent edits seem to mostly be in the article “Uncle Fred in the Springtime.”

Scholarpedia

Since I’ve noted one pretty much failed “competitor” to *Wikipedia*, here’s another: [Scholarpedia](#), “the peer-reviewed open-access encyclopedia.” The notion may be laudable. The site’s neither gone nor entirely moribund: the list of “recently published articles” (accessed on December 24, 2017) includes five articles in the second half of 2017.

I’m not qualified to discuss the validity or worth of the articles, which do appear to be by scholars. It’s heavy on physics but also active in some other areas, primarily in the sciences. About all I can do is point to it.

“The Closed, Unfriendly World Of Wikipedia” and anti-expert sentiment

This piece by Seth Finkelstein appeared [November 24, 2011](#) on *Infothought blog*—and refers and discusses [Danny Sullivan’s article](#) (the quoted title) from the previous day.

Sullivan’s piece is a classic, best read directly; it illustrates some of the reasons I gave up on “improving” *Wikipedia* years ago (but this is worse, since Sullivan is a “notable person” with [his own Wikipedia entry](#))—although, for a while at least (possibly having to do with Sullivan’s article?), the entry called him “non-notable”—and it’s still flagged with a “multiple issues” warning.

Anyway, Finkelstein’s more interested in the clear anti-expert strain at *Wikipedia*—one that’s still there unless you’re one of the experts who a *Wikipedia* editor is fond of.

There's a strange strain of anti-expert sentiment that runs through Wikipedia, and I see experts run into it again and again. It's [not simple to articulate this aspect](#), since Wikipedia presents itself as a project to collect knowledge. That's usually where the PR fluff ends thought on the topic. But underneath, there's some very troubling social undercurrents.

So when Danny Sullivan writes:

I am a subject expert in the field of search marketing. A notable one - after all, Wikipedia says so. But my type of first-hand assertion isn't enough. Wikipedia would rather find third-party mainstream media resources that quote people, as if that is somehow better than first-party information.

That's exactly right - *"that is somehow better"*. Because first-party information is based in expert authority, while third-party mainstream media represents a kind of institutional approval. Some Wikipedia editors will actually agree with and justify this, from a rules-based perspective.

Finkelstein points to an interesting and long ["Hacker News" debate](#). I read part of it, but other than realizing that "consensus" means something very different in Wikipedialand, I'll only point to it.

And to the rest of Finkelstein's relatively brief commentary. By the way, the *Infthought* blog shut down on July 1, 2013, for reasons explained in the final post.

Wikiwhatever (A Retirement)

I'm including this relatively brief item by Jason Scott on [December 10, 2011](#) at *ASCII* because it's a good reflection of how many *Wikipedia* critics (myself included) came to feel along the way.

Since oh, January or thereabouts, I've had this entry about Wikipedia's 10th anniversary sitting around. I actually write most of these entries as drafts and let them sit, then come back and touch them up and do what you do with actual writing. The entry sat there for a whole year, and I just deleted it, as I'd realized something.

I'm kind of done being The Wikipedia Critic. I still find issues, and the landscape is rich with targets and self-important process lawyers and all the sketchy shit Jimbo Wales and other members have done over the years, but I am just kind of done being That Guy. The one who spends time after time proving a negative, showing the problems, then indicating why the problems are problems, and then doing it forever until I'm in the ground.

After noting some of the archival work he's doing now:

In all these cases, I didn't add things to then watch people change the content, the meaning, and blow down a bunch of legibility rules or linking policies to essentially destroy them. They're items. They were made. They got scanned or recorded. Here they are. A much better

week, in other words, than constructing cogent arguments about process. A *much* better week.

These days I'm the [Archive Team](#) Guy. I'm the Archiving/Preservation Guy. My [speeches are still fiery](#), my rage is still in effect, and my boundless need to make things better and more accessible still burns bright. It's just getting things *done now*. I like being this guy. I think I'm going to stay being him.

Hard to argue with that!

The 'Undue Weight' of Truth on Wikipedia

I'm increasingly reluctant to cite articles that *may* be behind a paywall, but this essay by Timothy Messer-Kruse on [February 12, 2012](#) in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* is such a clear and detailed example of what was questionable (and I suspect continues to be questionable) about *Wikipedia* policies that I made an exception. If you have access, go read the article.

Messer-Kruse is an expert on the Haymarket riot and trial: by 2012 he'd been studying it for a decade and written two books and some articles.

In some circles that affords me a presumption of expertise on the subject. Not, however, on Wikipedia.

His first problem with the article was in the description of the trial, which included the statement that the prosecution “did not offer evidence connecting any of the defendants with the bombing.” He notes that a similar claim in a textbook is what hooked him on Haymarket, when a student in a course he was teaching said “If the trial went on for six weeks and no evidence was presented, what did they talk about all those days?”

I have not resolved all the mysteries that surround the bombing, but I have dug deeply enough to be sure that the claim that the trial was bereft of evidence is flatly wrong. One hundred and eighteen witnesses were called to testify, many of them unindicted co-conspirators who detailed secret meetings where plans to attack police stations were mapped out, coded messages were placed in radical newspapers, and bombs were assembled in one of the defendants' rooms.

In what was one of the first uses of forensic chemistry in an American courtroom, the city's foremost chemists showed that the metallurgical profile of a bomb found in one of the anarchists' homes was unlike any commercial metal but was similar in composition to a piece of shrapnel cut from the body of a slain police officer. So overwhelming was the evidence against one of the defendants that his lawyers even admitted that their client spent the afternoon before the Haymarket rally building bombs, arguing that he was acting in self-defense.

So I removed the line about there being “no evidence” and provided a full explanation in Wikipedia's behind-the-scenes editing log. Within

minutes my changes were reversed. The explanation: “You must provide reliable sources for your assertions to make changes along these lines to the article.”

That was curious, as I had cited the documents that proved my point, including verbatim testimony from the trial published online by the Library of Congress. I also noted one of my own peer-reviewed articles. One of the people who had assumed the role of keeper of this bit of history for Wikipedia quoted the Web site’s “undue weight” policy, which states that “articles should not give minority views as much or as detailed a description as more popular views.” He then scolded me. “You should not delete information supported by the majority of sources to replace it with a minority view.”

He goes through several cycles (including being told to look at *Wikipedia’s* “civility” rules and threatened with being called a vandal) and had it made clear that *truth does not matter*: if most secondary sources “taken as reliable” repeat a flawed account, then that’s *the truth as recorded in Wikipedia*.

He did “succeed” to the extent that the passage now said prosecutors did not offer *credible* evidence. He figures that at this rate the many errors in the article might be fixed within a century.

Hundreds of comments, including defenders of the *Wikipedia* faith detailing what they believe the professor did wrong, and quite a few critics.

St this point, the Haymarket Affair article is almost certainly much improved—and, to be sure, Messer-Kruse’s two books are among the works cited.

Since I did look at the start of the Talk page in the *Wikipedia* “Haymarket Affair” article, I should also cite a commentary on the Messer-Kruse article by Rebecca J. Rosen on [February 16, 2012](#) at *The Atlantic*: “Does Wikipedia Have an Accuracy Problem?” The tease gives Rosen’s primary conclusion: “Yes, but only because history is in a constant state of revision.” It’s a good discussion, but one that clearly favors the “consensus” policy as appropriate—and maybe it is.

The Quiet Wikideath of BBS History

The trouble with retiring is that it’s hard to *stay* retired. Hey, I retired from writing about open access in November 2009, and meant it...and y’all know how *that* turned out. So, a year after Jason Scott retired from grumping about *Wikipedia*, here’s this [December 7, 2012](#) essay relating to Deletionists and the apparent attempt to purge *Wikipedia* of articles relating to BBS history.

Folks, I’ve [said I’m not a fan of Wikipedia](#) for nearly ten years now. I used to mention it in presentations until I found that eighteen-year-olds would confront me at the end, like I spoke out against oxygen or wearing socks. So I don’t mention it much anymore and generally, it doesn’t come up. They got a little better on some quarters anyway, and

so it's not a complete doomed airship, just one that lists poorly to one side now and then.

But every once in a while, something **really** stupid happens on Wikipedia, and by once in a while I mean *every single goddamned day*, and occasionally it's so "really stupid" someone thinks they have to summon me like I'm Odin and Ragnarök just popped out of the Advent calendar. "Do something", they say, or maybe something more along the lines of "You should see this", because if you're Ralph Nader what you really want to do is witness car crashes.

There's the internal politicking stupid, which is boring these days, and there's the "inaccurate howler lives on for months" stupid, which is fleetingly entertainment. Luckily nobody thinks to drag me to those tailgate parties.

No, the big one is "some numbnut gang has decided Wikipedia doesn't need entries on *this* this week."

Now, call me an old-fashioned kinda archiving guy, but keeping stuff around is, on the whole, a good thing. It's especially a good thing if what's being kept around is obviously the hard work of dozens or even hundreds of people contributing time and knowledge to make something better. Hey, put down the pitchforks, Charlie. I'm just saying, here. You come up against something that's obviously got some weight and effort, your first thought isn't to toss it into the compactor.

That's the start of an interesting story, told in Scott's inimitable voice (but the low-profanity version). Worth reading—as are the comments.

The Decline of Wikipedia

This is an excellent and, as far as I can tell, fair-minded discussion of *Wikipedia's* history in the 2010-2013 era, written by Tom Simonite and appearing [October 22, 2013](#) at *MIT Technology Review*. The tease:

The community that built the largest encyclopedia in history is shrinking, even as more people and Internet services depend on it than ever.

Can it be revived, or is this the end of the Web's idealistic era?

Note what's *not* suggested: that *Wikipedia* is dying (within the article it's noted that tens of millions of dollars have been raised for the project, even as of 2013—and I know that "please send us money" banners pop up once in a while, presumably to some effect). What is suggested—well, asserted—is that it wasn't doing as well as would originally have been helped. The second and third paragraphs, following a generally laudatory lede:

Yet Wikipedia and its stated ambition to "compile the sum of all human knowledge" are in trouble. The volunteer workforce that built the project's flagship, the English-language Wikipedia—and must defend it against vandalism, hoaxes, and manipulation—has shrunk by more

than a third since 2007 and is still shrinking. Those participants left seem incapable of fixing the flaws that keep Wikipedia from becoming a high-quality encyclopedia by any standard, including the project's own. Among the significant problems that aren't getting resolved is the site's skewed coverage: its [entries on Pokemon](#) and [female porn stars](#) are comprehensive, but its pages on female novelists or places in sub-Saharan Africa are sketchy. Authoritative entries remain elusive. Of the 1,000 articles that the project's own volunteers have tagged as forming the core of a good encyclopedia, most don't earn even Wikipedia's own middle-ranking quality scores.

The main source of those problems is not mysterious. The loose collective running the site today, estimated to be 90 percent male, operates a crushing bureaucracy with an often abrasive atmosphere that deters newcomers who might increase participation in Wikipedia and broaden its coverage.

There's a lot more, and it's all worth reading. The close:

Yet it may be unable to get much closer to its lofty goal of compiling all human knowledge. Wikipedia's community built a system and resource unique in the history of civilization. It proved a worthy, perhaps fatal, match for conventional ways of building encyclopedias. But that community also constructed barriers that deter the newcomers needed to finish the job. Perhaps it was too much to expect that a crowd of Internet strangers would truly democratize knowledge. Today's Wikipedia, even with its middling quality and poor representation of the world's diversity, could be the best encyclopedia we will get.

That sounds about right.

The Winter of Wikipedia's Discontent

This Roy Tennant column, appearing [October 24, 2013](#) at *Library Journal*, could be considered an exemplar of *Wikipedia* issues.

Recently, at a colleague's urging, I tackled creating a page in Wikipedia for a significant female librarian. I chose Mary Wright Plummer, who was the second female president of the American Library Association, and who also served as President of the New York State Library Association, the New York Library Club, and the Long Island Library Club. Perhaps even more significantly, she was credited with originating the idea for a code of ethics for the profession.

He notes that he provided citations for facts and notability, provided links as needed and then...

Ms. Plummer was clearly an important contributor to librarianship in the United States by any measure. Flush with excitement at creating my first Wikipedia page from scratch (I had contributed other bits before but never a complete page), I submitted the article for review. I soon received

a message that there was a backlog and it was possible I would not hear anything for up to six weeks. I heard back in about a month.

My article had been [rejected](#). Apparently I had not documented her importance sufficiently enough, using independent sources. Her presidency of the American Library Association notwithstanding, nor her obituary in the *New York Times*. At this point I walked away, not having enough motivation and/or time to fight for Ms. Plummer's inclusion alongside such luminaries as [Princess Peach](#).

There's more—a colleague knows which path to take to get the article accepted—and he discusses possible ways to improve the situation. You can read them in the original, and *do* read the comments, a mix of stuff including another example of the problem (the discussion between a disappointed would-be contributor and some Experienced Wikifolk being very much part of that problem). By the end of one series of comments, it's increasingly clear that an appropriate motto would be “The encyclopedia that a community builds and controls, and if you're willing to spend enough time and adopt the proper attitudes, you might become part of that community.” Not quite the same as “to which anybody can contribute” but a lot more honest.

In-Defense-Of-Inclusionism

But of course all this stuff is fairly old. Surely all the problems have been solved and *Wikipedia* is back to fulfilling its original ideals? Maybe—but there's some counterevidence in this piece by “Gwern” at gwern.net, created on January 15, 2009 but updated as recently as [September, 30, 2017](#). I didn't read the whole thing (much of it is source code or lists), and can't really comment in general, but this piece is by an active, experienced early Wikipedian (more than 100,000 edits)

Excerpts:

We talked idealistically about how Wikipedia could become an encyclopedia of specialist encyclopedias, the superset of encyclopedias. would you expect to see a Bulbasaur article in a Pokemon encyclopedia? yes? then let's have a Bulbasaur article. The potential was that Wikipedia would be the summary of the Internet and books/media. Instead of punching in a keyword to a search engine and getting 100 pages dealing with tiny fragments of the topic (in however much detail), you would get a coherent overview summarizing everything worth knowing about the topic, for almost all topics.

But now Wikipedia's narrowing focus means, only *some* of what is worth knowing, about *some* topics. Respectable topics. Mainstream topics. Unimpeachably Encyclopedic topics.

These days, that ideal is completely gone. If you try to write niche articles on certain topics, people will tell you to save it for Wikia. I am not

excited or interested in such a parochial project which excludes so many of my interests, which does not want me to go into great depth about even the interests it deems meritorious - and a great many other people are not excited either, especially as they begin to realize that even if you navigate the culture correctly and get your material into Wikipedia, there is far from any guarantee that your contributions will be respected, not deleted, and improved. For the amateurs and also experts who wrote wikipedia, why would they want to contribute to some place that doesn't want them?

...

It may take only a few restrictions before one has inched far enough the barriers axis that the contributions does in fact fall by tenfold. One sees Wikipedia slowly adding restrictions:

- 2005: we [ban anonymous page creation](#);
- 2006: anonymous users must [solve CAPTCHAs](#) if they wish to add URLs;
- 2007: use `{{fact}}` templates institutionalized, and tougher referencing guidelines;
- 2008: harsher [AfdS](#) mean a banner year for [deletionists](#) such as [User:TTN](#);
- 2009: [flagged revisions](#) on some wikis, in some areas of English Wikipedia. The end of live changes, [prior restraint](#) on publication.
- 201?: [new editors banned](#) from article creation (for their own good, of course), with additional measures like [pending changes](#)

There's a lot more here, and probably a lot more to say. But not in this odd mini-roundup. If you're interested, of the 22 originally-tagged pieces I didn't use, nine had simply disappeared and one was a duplicate; the rest no longer seemed timely or relevant. I suppose 25% disappearance over six+ years really isn't bad.

Words

Writing, Publishing and Stuff

Recent Words pieces have been about ebooks and print books—and there's likely to be another one of those in the future. Meanwhile, other words-related pieces have been sitting, and it's time for a multithemed roundup. (Am I deliberately clearing out Diigo entries? Yes, at least to some extent. Is that part of a gradual shutdown of *C&I*? Unclear.)

Pseudonymity

This cluster began as a set of eight items I thought related to ethics in writing and publishing. Somehow, that's boiled down to two items, both relating to pseudonymity.

Pseudonymy, again

The Library Loon posted this on [February 21, 2012](#) at *Gavia Libraria*. The issue is whether pseudonymous writing is credible or important—or ethical. In this case, the discussion arises from a comment on a post by another pseudonymous blogger. The Loon's commentary stands nicely on its own, and the blog uses a CC BY license, so I'll quote the whole thing, then add comments on it, its own comments, and the referent.

The Loon could have predicted it, really: [@FakeElsevier has been accused of being a pseudonym](#). Horrors.

If some folks don't like what one says, they will abuse one's wallet name to intimidate one into ceasing to say it. We all know this, except apparently for Google+ engineers. Some of us have done it. Some of us have been on the receiving end of it. Some of us have watched in dismay as healthy, necessary conversations have been curtailed because of it.

So why are we having credibility discussions about pseudonyms? Why? Pseudonyms exist in part because *it's the only way some things that need saying can be half-safely said*. Assuredly it would be more courageous to associate those words with one's wallet name, but in that case, how many of the words would be said at all? Quashing pseudonymy is quashing speech.

Anyone who doesn't care to believe or trust the Loon's words because she's an incorporeal pseudonym is invited not to believe and trust those words. Anyone who doesn't care to read her words or engage with them, likewise. Anyone who cares to disparage her because she's a pseudonym may go right ahead.

The Loon thinks that most thoughtful librarians and library-interested can engage with words devoid of wallet-name authorship. Her commenters near-universally bear that odd notion out. When there's a problem with the words, that problem can be pointed out (and the Loon's commenters do that, and she's grateful for it) just as any other problem with words can.

[The Loon is @FakeElsevier](#). She hopes many of her readers are too. Anyone who wishes to be the Loon is invited to; why not? Sometimes this is how we protect each other, as well as necessary speech and action. [O los has de perdonar, o matar la villa toda](#). It's a very old idea, probably a good bit older than Lope de Vega.

In the Loon's experience, as in @FakeElsevier's, hammering on pseudonymy is a distraction tactic. Let's not give in to it, please, and those who resort to it should at minimum think twice.

Maybe that last paragraph is the most essential: it's most useful to attack pseudonymous sources when they're saying something important.

"Wallet name" is a nice coinage (at least I hadn't encountered it): the name on your credit cards and driver's license. And the Loon's right: for some people in some situations, pseudonymity is the only way to "half-safely" say some things—and suppressing pseudonymity diminishes free speech. I find myself especially frustrated by those who equate pseudonymity with anonymity: they're very different things. The Loon has a consistent voice and has, I think, established itself as a valuable commentator, adding heft to each post through context; anonymous screeds lack context by nature.

I may be an odd one to support pseudonymity strongly (although, technically, "Walt" is not the first part of my wallet name), since I'm one of those boring types whose username and screen name on all social media, as far as I know, is "waltcrawford."

There's not much to say about the single comment other than "well stated, and I agree." Then there's the referent: the comment on a post that triggered the Loon's post. It is, as you might guess, by Fake Elsevier on *The Real Fake Elsevier*; the [February 19, 2012](#) post has received 157 comments.

The post is aimed at Elsevier employees and is a serious discussion of the Elsevier boycott and how Elsevier might want to think about its future. It's a careful, serious, measured discussion.

The comments—including responses from fakeelsevier itself—are wide-ranging and include some gems, such as this paragraph that could explain a lot about researcher reactions to OA:

And frankly, I get the impression that a lot of scientists don't care if their work gets read at all – it's just a stamp to put on the CV. This point of view may be a bit on the cynical side of things, but if you're a practicing scientist, I think you know what I am talking about.

At one point, I read a satirical paper about Write-Only Memory, the ideal publication for such articles—a paper that seemed less satirical as I began to understand that many late-generation microdiskette drives effectively created write-only media. But that's a different story... And we're getting over into OA, but that paragraph is part of a response to a comment that claims that Elsevier reduces subscription fees to account for fees paid to provide OA in "hybrid" journals. Part of the response: "I'd like to see that one in writing before I believed it"—and it's pretty evident that this isn't happening.

Anyway...the first link in the quoted material is to comment #45, by Liz Smith (then of Elsevier). Her comment, again in full:

I always hoped that when I got my 15 minutes of fame it would be for my stellar rendition of ‘Don’t Cry for Me, Argentina’ or my best-selling detective novel. Oh well.

I’ve had some fun sparring with @FakeElsevier on Twitter because I appreciate the cathartic effect of humour, too. But I think it’s one thing to create a fake account for satire and mockery and quite another to offer serious commentary anonymously. It’s slightly troubling when people purporting to be academics—whose anger comes at least partly from the belief that publishers take your intellectual property—are not willing to put their name to their own thoughts. It’s a little ironic, too. Say what you want about Kent Anderson, at least he isn’t hiding. Mike Taylor, Matt Wardell and Stephen Curry aren’t either, which is why I’ve been willing to talk to them.

Social media has changed academic communications in many ways – but it shouldn’t eliminate transparency. So FakeElsevier now that you’re moving beyond 140 characters and aiming to make real substantive, thoughtful arguments, I think it’s time you let us know who you are. I’ll be happy to engage then.

So serious commentary can’t be pseudonymous? Thus the Loon’s post—and a number of responses, beginning with this from Mike Taylor (or is it “Mike Taylor”?):

Come on, Liz, that makes no sense at all. Either FakeElsevier makes good points or he/she doesn’t. Dismissing his arguments on the basis of who he or she may or may not be is the purest form of *ad hominem*.

For that matter, you don’t really know who *I* am. You know that I give my name as Mike Taylor, but since we’ve never met I might, for all you know, be an Eskimo schoolgirl. Whether I am or not makes no difference to the value of my arguments.

And that of course is one of the huge benefits of online discourse. [On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog](#). Arguments can only be judged on their own merits. Hey, that reminds me of something ... what is it, now? Oh yes, I remember — science! You know — double-blind peer-review and all that.

So, here we all are, all scientists, and all evaluating evidence on its own strengths and weaknesses. Don’t bow out of that. You’ve been asking for OA advocated to dial down the outrage and calmly lay out the issues. That’s *exactly* what FakeElsevier has done here, probably as well as any article I’ve read (and I’ve read a lot). Now that you have what you asked for, backing out on the basis of the author’s anonymity is going to make you look cowardly.

Gee Mike, so if I’m not a scientist...no, let’s not go there. A bit later, fake notes this—a bit tangential, but worth noting anyway:

The primary reason for anonymity in peer review is to allow reviewers to be free to offer an honest appraisal of work without fear of petty retribution from more senior/powerful colleagues (it also helps prevent “you-scratch-my-back-I-scratch-yours” type situations, though not perfectly). Much of grant review is also done anonymously for these same reasons.

There are fields (e.g. computer science), where review is typically *double* blind (i.e. the reviewers don't know who the authors are either). How do they judge the validity of the work in the absence of knowing the reputation of the author and their institution? Simple. They read the paper. (Amazing concept, no?)

I must admit to some confusion when, in working on OA-related studies, I realized that some fields (most?) use single-blind reviewing: that would seem to (and I suspect does) tilt the playing field for second-rate work coming from established sources. My only peer-reviewed work (writing and reviewing) has been in librarianship, which is another one of those fields where double-blind reviewing is the norm. (I would note that on two occasions I believed I knew who the author of a paper was based on the paper itself; in both cases, I was wrong.) In some fields and some cases, double-blind peer review can't work, but I never knew it wasn't the norm.

There is a *lot* more in the comment stream, some of it fascinating, but if I spend this much time on each of 66 items, this will be a *very* long little roundup, so let's leave it at that.

On outing in the sciblogging community

This essay by Mark Chu-Carroll appeared on [January 20, 2014](#) at *Good Math, Bad Math*. Key paragraphs:

For those who don't know, there's a complete horses ass named Henry Gee. Henry is an editor at the science journal Nature. Poor Henry got into some fights with DrIsis (a prominent science blogger), and DrIsis was mean to him. The poor little guy was so hurt that he decided that he needed to get back at her - and so, Henry went ahead and he outed her, announcing her real name to the world.

This was a thoroughly shitty thing to do.

It's not that I think Isis didn't do anything wrong. We've got history, she and I. My experience with her led me to conclude that she's a petty, vicious bully that takes great pleasure in inflicting pain and anguish on other people. She's also someone who's done a lot of good things for her friends, and if you want to find out about any of it, go read another blog - plenty of people have written about her in the last couple of days.

That third paragraph makes an important point: it's harder and more meaningful to defend an enemy than it is to defend a friend. (Yes, I've been an ACLU member for many years—at least 15.) More excerpts:

People use pseudonyms for a lot of different reasons. Some people do for bad reasons, like separating unethical online behavior from their professional identity. But some people do it to avoid professional retaliation for perfectly reasonable behaviors - there are tenure committees at many universities that would hold blogging against a junior faculty; there are companies that don't won't allow employees to blog under their real names; there are people who blog under a pseudonym in order to protect themselves from physical danger and violence!

Once you say "If someone makes me angry enough, it's all right for me to reveal their real identity", what you're saying is that none of those reasons matter. Your hurt feelings take precedence. You've got the right to decide whether their reasons for using a pseudonym are important enough to protect or not.

Sorry, but no. People's identities belong to them. I don't care how mean someone is to you online: you don't have the right to reveal their identity. Unless someone is doing something *criminal*, their identity isn't yours to reveal. (And if they *are* doing something criminal, you should seriously consider reporting them to the appropriate legal authorities, rather than screwing around online!)

There's more, and it's pointedly good. The comment stream is long and tends to get derailed at times.

I've been in a case like this: a pseudonymous blogger I found distasteful and who I *believed* I knew the identity of. I claim no higher moral ground for having *not* outed the blogger; I just blame common sense and perhaps a Berkeley education.

Publishers and Publishing

Various aspects of the publishing game...

New Writers, eBook Publishers, and the Power to Negotiate

John Scalzi [posted this on March 10, 2013](#) at *Whatever*—and, yes, that is over half a decade ago. But still relevant...

In writing the pieces about Random House and [its egregious, non-advance paying eBook imprints](#) and [how no writer ever should submit to them](#), or indeed [work with any publisher that does not offer an advance](#), there are some folks in the comments and elsewhere on the Internet who are saying things along the lines of the following (paraphrased to condense points into a single statement):

That's easy for Scalzi to say because he has power now, but us newer authors have no power to negotiate. And the market is changing and there are lots of good eBook publishers who just happen not to pay an advance.

One word for all of the above: Bullshit.

But of course there's more, including some history and one of those nearly-universal truths:

Sprinkling the Internet on a bad business model does not magically make it a good business model. It merely means that the people who are pursuing a bad business model are hoping you are credulous enough to believe that being *electronic* is space-age zoomy and awesome and there is no possible way this brilliant business plan could ever fail. Or even worse, that *they* believe that being electronic means all these things, which means *they* are credulous. Which is not a very good thing to have as the basis of one's business model.

He discusses the nonsense that “the publisher's taking all the risk” (only true if your time and reputation are both worthless) and the fact that an advance and its size signal how much the publisher believes in the book.

As for that “that's easy to say” argument:

Now, let's talk about me for a minute. Yes, I am in a position where I have some influence on how my contracts are negotiated, what's in them and what's not, up to and including how much of an advance I get. But here's the thing: Back when I was selling my very first novel? I was *also* in a position to have influence on how my contracts were negotiated, what was in them, up and including the advance.

Why? *Because I had something the publisher wanted.* Namely, the novel in question.

People: Unless the publisher you're talking to is a complete scam operation, devoted only to sucking money from you for “publishing services,” then the reason that they are interested in your novel is because someone at the publisher looked at it and said, *hey, this is good. I can make money off of this.* Which means — surprise! Your work has value to the publisher. Which means you have leverage *with* the publisher.

An excellent and not very long discussion that every writer who wishes to become a commercial author should read, ending with five key points:

1. Not offering advances is not a great new business model, it's a crappy old one;
2. Writers are not responsible for propping up crappy business models;
3. Don't believe anyone who tells you publishers carry all the risk of publication;
4. Even new writers have leverage with publishers;
5. If you don't respect yourself or your work, no one else will either.

More than 120 comments, some worth reading.

Getting into print the hard way

Kevin Smith posted this essay [on December 22, 2014](#) at *Scholarly Communications @ Duke*—and I'll have a little very old personal experience to add to Smith's clear, detailed story of academic book publishing. The lede:

I hope I will be forgiven some self-promotion if I point out that my first book (that's a little like saying my "first" marriage – so far it is the only one, and no other is anticipated, but one should never say never) has just been published. It is a handbook of intellectual property designed specifically to address the needs and concerns of researchers and teachers, and it was published on December 10 by the Association of College and Research Libraries. It is available for purchase on the [ALA Store site here](#). There is also a PDF made available under a Creative Commons Attribution/Non-commercial license [on the ACRL site](#). I also expect to have a PDF in the DukeSpace institutional repository soon.

The story ends happily, with ALA and ACRL, but didn't start that way:

The story begins when I was contacted in 2009 by an editor for the University of Chicago Press, who suggested that I should write a handbook on IP for scholars. I was immediately interested, and, at the editor's request, wrote first a proposal and then drafts of the first two chapters. Those chapters were sent out for review and we received both helpful suggestions and a recommendation to continue to develop the book from three reviewers. With that step complete, the U of C Press and I signed a contract in late 2010, and I set out on a long and difficult journey to finish and publish the book.

The writing process took me considerably longer than I expected; no surprise there, of course. When I apologized to my editor I was assured that it was OK; they would be interested in the project, they said, whenever it was complete. During this time, however, I got the first indications that this would not be a smooth relationship. I sent in chapters as I finished them, as the editor encouraged me to do, but did not get any of the promised feedback as I progressed. For a couple of years I was essentially writing in a vacuum.

To summarize what follows, when Smith turned in the complete manuscript in May 2013, he waited. And waited. After six months, he checked and learned that the press had yet to receive its required two positive external reviews—and five *more* months later, he didn't even get responses to his emails.

At this point I was pretty frustrated. Five people had read at least part of the manuscript, and all had recommended publication. All of them had also made really helpful suggestions for improving the text which I tried to adopt. But the U. of C. Press was still passively waiting for that one final reader so they could comply to the letter with their self-created rules. What bothered me most was the apparent lack of effort

and commitment I was getting from the Press. After talking with several academic authors about my situation, I decided to withdraw the book from the U of C Press.

At which point the editors try to talk him out of it—and also say “but we have a contract.” At which point he asked for two “concessions”: payment of half the agreed advance—he had *not* received the advance—and some form of open access version. Well...

Turns out the contract said the first half of the advance was owed when the manuscript was submitted, although the editor said otherwise, so the press was in breach of contract...and he never heard from that editor again.

The story ends happily. The director of the press wrote an apology, confirmed that the contract had been breached, released him from the contract *and* paid the advance. After one more commercial misadventure, he went to ACRL and got proper attention and, within six months, had a published book.

From this experience I take away three lessons, which I think are worth sharing. First, the claims about how much effort publishers put into a new book, and the help they provide to authors, are at least sometimes exaggerated. I was working with a prestigious university press on a book they had solicited in the first place, and yet did not get nearly the kind of assistance or interest that I sometimes hear promised. Second, it is extremely important to read, negotiate and save a copy of the publication contract. That my book is now in print is largely due, I believe, to the fact that I could go back to the actual language of our agreement in order to convince the U. of C. to release me to find another publisher. And finally, as I said at the beginning, libraries and library organizations, in my experience, understand the needs and goals of scholarly authors better than commercial presses. As the future of academic publishing unfolds, I strongly hope that more and more of it will be in the hands, or under the oversight, of libraries.

Do read the whole essay: it's better than my summary.

My own story is a *little* different and dates back to the early 1980s, when I wrote *MARC for Library Use*. (Why I felt compelled to write the book, which was an enormous and extended effort, is another story, one I've probably already told.) I submitted the ms. to ALA Publishing, since that seemed like the obvious choice. After an extended period, they came back to me and suggested turning it into a cataloging/tagging workbook. After I explained why that wasn't going to happen, there was more waiting...and I finally withdrew the submission, asked around, and offered it to Knowledge Industry Publications, Inc. The book did quite well for them and for me, and was followed by half a dozen other professional books for them and, after the line was purchased by G.K. Hall, for Hall.

Some years later, I did have several books published by ALA Publishing, generally successfully. They always behaved professionally, my editor became a friend, and—by the way—they paid advances: half on contract

signature, half on accepted submission. (Yes, Knowledge Industry paid advances as well—never large, but always promptly.)

My own lessons were threefold:

- Read the contract and propose modifications if needed. (For example, all or nearly all of my books are copyrighted in my name.)
- Don't wait too long for a response—it may mean that the editor or publisher is just wrong for the project.
- You should receive an advance except in very special circumstances; it probably won't be life-changing (most library books just don't sell tens of thousands of copies) but at least some of it should be, well, *in advance*.

Show Me the Money

I start with fourteen items that seemed to be related to the economics of publishing. How many will survive? [Five, but some had simply disappeared.] One thing's clear: as usual, sections overlap. I'm skipping some items that seem to be overly inside-baseball when viewed a second time.

The Importance of Reversion Clauses in Book Contracts

This piece, [by Victoria Strauss on April 27, 2012](#) at *Writer Beware*, is an excellent brief tutorial on why book reversion clauses are more important than they used to be—and how they should *and should not* be worded. If you don't know what a reversion clause is, and ever plan to write a book, you really should: it's the process by which an author reclaims publishing rights from the publisher when the book has gone out of print.

Admittedly, for most books and most authors, there wasn't a lot of reason to worry about reversion in the pre-ebook days: after all, you probably weren't going to get another traditional publisher to reissue a book after it had stopped selling. But...

In the past few years, however, once-sold rights have become extremely valuable--to authors, who can tap into the rising enthusiasm for ebooks by self-publishing their backlists; and also to publishers, which are eager to digitally exploit the long tail of their rights catalogs. The reversion clause in a life-of-copyright contract is more vital than ever—and it is equally vital that it be precise.

A typical pre-digital reversion clause was entirely one-sided, such as this one that Strauss quotes (from a 1997 Avon contract):

If all editions of the Work in the USA and Canada which have been published or licensed by the Publisher are out of print, and if, within six (6) months after written demand by the Author or the Author's representative, the Publisher does not agree to provide within an additional six (6)

months adequate stock to meet the normal demand for the Work, or to arrange for a reprint or book-club edition...this Agreement will forthwith terminate and all rights in the Work will revert to the Author...The Work shall be considered in print if it is for sale by the Publisher in any edition, or if it is under option or license granted by the Publisher.

Of course, what with Print on Demand and ebooks, a book can still be “for sale” without taking up warehouse space, so the reversion clause may never come not play even though there haven’t been royalties in years.

More appropriate for today’s needs is something that ties “in print” to some measure of actual ongoing sales. Strauss offers two examples (both from her own contracts), one that uses sales count, one that uses dollar amounts. Here’s the latter:

The Work shall be considered in print if it is on sale by Publisher in any English-language edition available through normal trade channels in the United States or if it is subject to an option or an outstanding license for any English-language edition available through normal trade channels in the United States under this Agreement. If the Work is not in print, Author may request in writing that Publisher keep the Work in print. Publisher will have six (6) months to comply. If Publisher fails to comply...then at the end of such six (6) month period this Agreement shall terminate and all of the rights granted to Publisher shall revert to Author...The existence of an individual print on demand edition or an electronic edition shall not constitute the Work being in print unless there are total combined sales of \$500 or more a year for these editions.

The piece ends with an example of what can happen with imprecise reversion language—a difficult story probably worth reading—and a link to a major publisher’s attempt to return to the old publisher-has-all-the-rights clauses.

My own experience? When the publishers I’d originally worked with got out of the library business, and at the time I thought (wrongly) that there might be a point in republishing one or more of them, I wrote (politely) to the publisher and requested reversion (I don’t believe there were reversion clauses in the contracts). The publisher was responsive and did in fact revert the rights.

In Defense of the Royalty-Only Model for Digital Publication

This post, [by Evan Gregory on March 12, 2013](#) at *Flaubert’s Pyramid*, is a response to [a John Scalzi post](#) that I did not comment on. A key element of that post (which is mostly links to previous posts including one discussed earlier) is Scalzi’s argument that publishers should pay advances, period:

One might suppose, looking at the various pieces, that I have a thing against eBook-only publishers. That’s entirely not true. I have a thing

against publishers who don't pay advances, and unfortunately it appears a number of eBook-only publishers want to bake not having advances into their business model.

Show me the eBook-only publisher who pays actual advances (i.e., more than a token sum) for the work writers do, and otherwise treats writers fairly and equitably, and I'll show you the eBook-only publisher I am *just fine* with.

Gregory disagrees—and it may be worth noting that (a) Gregory is an agent and (b) one of his clients is an e-only publisher that doesn't pay advances. (Is there a conflict in an agent representing authors *and* publishers?)

The royalty-only model is, as mentioned by John, not a new model, but its rise in the digital book world is not surprising, nor should its adoption by the larger publishers for the purposes of creating their own low-overhead imprints be necessarily surprising either. The model was born out of desperation by upstart e-publishers who didn't have the initial capital to pay out advances. Even before the rise in popularity of self-publishing, they needed an arrow in their quiver to convince authors to write for them, rather than focus their efforts elsewhere. That arrow was a higher than average royalty, and in some circumstances flexibility on the rights retained by the author.

The benefits to the publisher of such a model are fairly obvious: by not having to pay advances, they had more money to invest in expanding their business, and greater discretion to acquire works. By not having to worry about recouping an advance and by having limited production costs, not only could these small upstarts publish with greater frequency, but they could also experiment with more niche works and sub-genres, and find readerships that were previously not serviced by the larger publishers.

What's in it for the author? He stresses new genres that he thinks wouldn't get published otherwise, and uses erotic romance as a prime example.

In 2000 there was no one willing to publish an author's male-male paranormal romance novel, now an author can choose between several different publishers, including an imprint of the largest romance publisher in the world. Next year Ellora's Cave authors will pioneer several new sub-genres (ever wonder what a vampire steampunk menage-a-trois might be like?) and a handful of their authors will grace the [New York Times e-book best-seller list while doing so](#).

It's hard to say that Ellora's Cave's authors are exploited by their royalty only agreements because they receive no advances. Authors receive a substantial share of their book's take, and the back-end compensation is not as big a burden because the lead time between delivery of the manuscript and publication is short, and royalties are paid monthly or quarterly. Certainly there have been a few authors whose experience

with Ellora's Cave didn't live up to their expectations of what publication should be, but when considering the alternative (no publication at all) it hardly seems fair to begrudge Ellora's Cave their business model.

I believe the one-sentence paragraph quoted below is key to Gregory's whole discussion, and it's certainly hinted at above:

While I'm not running to go get all my clients digital-only royalty-only deals (I would prefer an advance against royalties and a print component as, I'm sure, would most of my clients) **a royalty-only ebook deal is better than no deal at all**, and it presents a viable alternative to self-publishing for authors who don't have the knack for it. [Emphasis added.]

After that, it's a discussion of why regular publishers won't take a chance on obscure books, e.g.

Not every book is mainstream enough to warrant a substantial investment by a publisher (just like erotica was thought to be unpublishable in 2000) but that doesn't mean there's no readership for that book. A publisher's knowledge of the market (or potential markets) is not absolute, and because they can't afford to take as many risks when it comes to offering an advance they often don't.

My question would be: given that a publisher may be putting little or no money into a no-advance ebook, why would an author expect the publisher to do effective marketing or distribution? As Scalzi says, an advance means the publisher has skin in the game.

But read it yourself. I'm unconvinced. The question is: What makes a no-advance/e-only publisher better than self-publishing? There may be good answers, to be sure. The final comment (as I write this—it's from S.A. Archer on February 14, 2014) certainly raises questions. You might also want to read [yet another John Scalzi post](#), this one from March 8, 2013, that more specifically addresses the questions raised by the lack of an advance—questions I'm not sure were answered adequately by Gregory.

Writing with Profit in Mind? Your Book has Already Failed

You could think of this, by Nicolas Gremion [on December 16, 2013](#) at *Write it Sideways*, as an indirect riposte to Scalzi and his ilk—but that's not quite right. Here's the lede:

If your primary motivation for writing is making money, you're setting yourself up for disappointment.

I believe that's true, and I doubt Scalzi would argue. As Gremion notes, big-money authors are few and far between, and some eventual successes took a long time to happen. These days, with more books being published than ever before and *many* more being available, it's tough for a first book by any author to make it big—and “making it big” is generally the wrong approach:

It is important to stress that I am not trying to discourage anyone from selling books. What I *am* saying is that if money is your primary motivation for writing, you're setting yourself up for failure. Writers who work from a profit-driven mentality end up shooting themselves in the foot before their journey has even begun. There are a number of reasons for this:

- **They fit into a mold.** Instead of writing about something they are truly passionate about, they end up trying to fit into the next “it” genre. Suddenly, they're leaving behind what best suits them in favor of writing something they think will sell, like a teen vampire story or the next [Fifty Shades of Grey](#).
- **They rush the process.** New writers try to push their books out into the world before they're ready, which results in a less-than-perfect product for their readers—or a manuscript that has no chance of getting the attention of a literary agent.
- **They get discouraged.** While it's possible to make a living off writing, it doesn't just happen overnight. If you put out a book thinking you're going to sell 20,000 copies immediately, you might get discouraged when early sales are sluggish. Disappointment ends the careers of a lot of writers who confuse poor sales with bad writing.

There's more here, and I believe it's all sensible.

Some Writery Things on My Mind, 1/22/14

Back to John Scalzi, [this time on January 22, 2014](#) at *Whatever*, and here it's clear that, while Scalzi explicitly dislikes what he calls the “no one becomes a writer to get rich” gambit, he's honest about the unlikelihood of Striking It Rich On Your Very First Try. He notes [a poll of writers](#) suggesting that most writers earn less than \$1,000 a year and, while noting the likely weaknesses of the poll, says this:

That said, even if we discuss only the universe of respondents to the survey, the results aren't telling us anything we don't already know, both factually and anecdotally, which is that most writers aren't making a whole lot from their writing, and that having a diversified set of income streams is the way to go (also, day jobs and awesome spouses/partners are nice to have when you can get them).

And more, of course—including the note that Scalzi was writing for a long, long time before he could make a good living as a novelist.

The comments are fascinating, if lengthy.

A Moment of Financial Clarification

As for “no one becomes a writer to get rich” thing, [this January 23, 2013 post](#) is Scalzi's explanation of why he dislikes the gambit. He also addresses Samuel Johnson. A couple of key paragraphs:

Making money — and making a lot of it — has always been part of my professional writing game plan. It's one reason why I have been both shameless and unapologetic about the commercial aspects of my writing, whether it's me working as a writing/editing consultant for business or writing accessible novels. The money I make from writing means less time now I have to devote to sources of income other than writing, and less time later having to find other sources of income when (inevitably) my career slows down from its current happy level. The money I make from writing allows me to do nothing other than writing. So it helps to make a lot of it if at all possible.

Do I write only to make money? No; I write for lots of other reasons as well. Do I only consider money when it comes to choosing writing projects? No; I've written things for the pure enjoyment of writing them as well as for other factors, although once I was done with them I often looked to see how best to profit from them. Does writing with money as a consideration and being rich as a goal mean that waving money at me is the magic key to unlock my participation in something? Not always, because not all money is created equal, and the money I'm looking at is not only what's being waved in front of me now, but what taking the project will make available in the future. I can afford to look long term because making lots of money was always part of my thinking, and because it has been (along with many other factors including staggering good luck) I have the ability to turn down work that doesn't meet the long-term financial goals, and work that just doesn't appeal to me, for whatever reason.

(Nor do I think that everyone has to write with the goal of getting rich or making money. People like to quote/paraphrase Samuel Johnson, who once said "No one but a blockhead ever wrote except for money," but Johnson is as full of shit as any writer on the subject. You can write for all sorts of reasons, money being only one. If you want to be a professional writer, writing for money helps. Otherwise? Optional.

There's a bit more—and more than 120 comments beginning with Scalzi's own:

To put it out there before anyone else gets to it:

YES I AM A HACK SO THERE.

I've called myself a hack writer, but mostly to flatter myself and point out that I've never aimed for Literary Elegance.

Typography and Layout

Some items never grow old—even as I contemplate changing C&I's long-standing typeface (Berkeley) to a more commonly-available one that happens to produce unusually legible numbers (Constantia).

Space Invaders

This article by Farhad Manjoo is *very* old: it appeared [January 12, 2011](#) in *Slate*. The tease is the real message:

Why you should never, ever use two spaces after a period.

And the lede:

Can I let you in on a secret? Typing two spaces after a period is totally, completely, utterly, and inarguably *wrong*.

As Manjoo notes, this quaint habit dies hard.

What galls me about two-spacers isn't just their numbers. It's their certainty that they're right. Over Thanksgiving dinner last year, I asked people what they considered to be the "correct" number of spaces between sentences. The diners included doctors, computer programmers, and other highly accomplished professionals. Everyone—everyone!—said it was proper to use two spaces. Some people admitted to slipping sometimes and using a single space—but when writing something formal, they were always careful to use two. Others explained they mostly used a single space but felt guilty for violating the two-space "rule." Still others said they used two spaces all the time, and they were thrilled to be so proper. When I pointed out that they were doing it wrong—that, in fact, the correct way to end a sentence is with a period followed by a single, proud, beautiful space—the table balked. "Who says two spaces is wrong?" they wanted to know.

Typographers, that's who. The people who study and design the type-written word decided long ago that we should use one space, not two, between sentences.

That's followed by a very brief history of how the single space became the typographic norm and why so many folks think two spaces is right: namely, typewriters with monospaced typography.

Monospaced type gives you text that looks "loose" and uneven; there's a lot of white space between characters and words, so it's more difficult to spot the spaces between sentences immediately. Hence the adoption of the two-space rule—on a typewriter, an extra space after a sentence makes text easier to read. Here's the thing, though: Monospaced fonts went out in the 1970s. First electric typewriters and then computers began to offer people ways to create text using proportional fonts. Today nearly every font on your PC is proportional. ([Courier](#) is the one major exception.)

Manjoo's history is a little off. Most early electric typewriters also use monospaced type. But he's right overall—or at least I agree. (And when I used to edit the *LITA Newsletter*, the first thing I had to do with imported submissions was "globally replace multiple spaces with a single space.")

The rest of the article is interesting, especially the extent to which teachers who know better still *require* students to use two spaces *because that's how the teachers were taught*. Um.

I know: old and you've certainly heard about it. Never hurts to be reminded, though.

Hear, All Ye People; Harken, O Earth (Part 1)

I'm violating a current C&I rule by citing this Errol Morris piece, which appeared [August 8, 2012](#) in the *New York Times*—namely, I don't cite paywalled material. Whether this article is paywalled for you depends on the time of the month (and whether you subscribe). Although, looking at the URL, it appears to be on an NYT blog, so maybe there's no paywall.

In any case, I'm citing it because it reports on some fairly large-scale experiments as to whether typefaces affect credibility: whether someone's more or less likely to accept something depending on the typeface used.

In this experiment, at least, it does—and, surprisingly to me, the differences go beyond the simple “for Gaia's sake don't use Comic Sans” and the more subtle “good serif text is likely to be more credible than good sans text.”

It even goes beyond one possible corollary to the previous rule: Times New Roman, like Arial, is so ubiquitous that it's essentially invisible—although, in fact, TNR wasn't one of the typefaces in the large test. That distinction, which may be erroneous, is an anecdote: a student found that essays written in Georgia got *slightly* better grades than those written in Times New Roman—but *significantly* better grades than those written in Trebuchet (sans, unlike the other two).

The experiment involved some 45,000 people reading an essay appearing in one of six typefaces: Baskerville, Comic Sans, Computer Modern, Georgia, Helvetica and Trebuchet. Three sans, three serif. Of the three serif faces, one (Georgia) is relatively simple and sturdy; one (Computer Modern) is a clean, contemporary face—and one (Baskerville) is a classic. After reading the essay, the participants answered a brief quiz indicating agreement or disagreement.

Which typeface was the most “disagreeable”? (That is, seemed to be least convincing.) Need you ask?

More surprising: looking at weighted agreement or disagreement (the quiz had the usual level-of-agreement Likert-scale questions), all three serif faces did better than any of the sans faces on weighted agreement—and two of the three did better on weighted disagreement. Georgia, the weakest of the three on weighted agreement, had the *worst* score for weighted disagreement.

I'm a little surprised that Baskerville—the clear winner across the board—did better than Computer Modern, but that difference is also one of the smallest in the test.

An interesting test and discussion. Worth reading.

Lots of comments, but when you have one early comment saying that Computer Modern was “the first sans serif typeface for computer printing”—an odd thing to say about a typeface with distinct serifs—one begins to wonder. Indeed, many of them say more about the commenters than the article—e.g., the one that calls the experiment because this person finds Baskerville *indistinguishable* from Times New Roman. (I find Arial nearly indistinguishable from Helvetica, and both boring, but I’m sure there are differences I’d notice if I liked either face a little better.)

All the Print that Fits

This piece, by James Grimmelman [on January 30, 2015](#) at *The Laboratorim* (2d ser.) isn’t about typefaces as such—it’s about layout. More specifically, it’s about page size, font size and readability.

I have criticized law reviews for their [poor typefaces](#) and for their [poor small caps](#). But all is not wrong in law review-ville, because law reviews as a rule get something else right: page dimensions. 8.5” x 11” is a difficult size for a typeset single-column printed page, and law reviews mostly avoid its traps. The problem arises from the interaction of three constraints:

- A line of text should be between 45 and 75 characters for optimal readability, at least according to conventional wisdom.
- The human eye can comfortably read printed text with a font size down to about 9 or 10 points, depending on the typeface.
- A font’s point size and its characters per inch are inversely proportional. A typical 12-point body font will have about 12 to 13 characters per inch.

In a nutshell, the problem is that an 8.5” page is *too wide*. The designer needs to fill the space with something: large fonts, long lines, large margins, or multiple columns. None of these options is ideal

That’s the start, and he continues by pointing out the problems with each “solution.” Then there’s what law reviews tend to do: use a smaller page, mostly right around the classic book size, 6” x 9”.

A good read. Obviously, or at least I’d like to think it’s obvious, I agree: this publication, which has always used 11pt. body type, was two columns for 8.5” x 11” printing—and is now 6” x 9” single column.

Praise the Colophon: Twenty Notes on Type

I’ll close this section by mentioning, but not really discussing, this [March 24, 2015 article](#) by Nick Ripatrazone at *The Millions*. If you do find out what typefaces a book uses, it’s probably in a colophon. Some of my books contain last-page colophons; some have a paragraph on the copyright page giving typographic details; some have neither. Colophons: good things.

Writing

10 Tips on How to Write Less Badly

Tip 11: If that's a sentence-equivalent for [this September 6, 2010 article](#) by Michael C. Munger at *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, it should be "Ten," not "10." But, of course, if you're flagging a listicle, it has to be "10." This is another policy variation on my part, but I seem able to read *CHE* articles—at least older ones—more often than not.

Most academics, including administrators, spend much of our time writing. But we aren't as good at it as we should be. I have never understood why our trade values, but rarely teaches, nonfiction writing.

In my nearly 30 years at universities, I have seen a lot of very talented people fail because they couldn't, or didn't, write. And some much less talented people (I see one in the mirror every morning) have done OK because they learned how to write.

Munger says the standards of writing in most scholarly disciplines are so low that you don't need to write *well* to stand out—just less badly. The first sentences of his ten points:

1. Writing is an exercise.
2. Set goals based on output, not input.
3. Find a voice; don't just "get published."
4. Give yourself time.
5. Everyone's unwritten work is brilliant.
6. Pick a puzzle.
7. Write, then squeeze the other things in.
8. Not all of your thoughts are profound.
9. Your most profound thoughts are often wrong.
10. Edit your work, over and over.

If some of those seem obscure, go read the whole article: it's not that long, and the writing is at least adequate. (Not that I'm in a position to criticize the brilliance of anybody's prose!)

The close:

If you have trouble writing, then you just haven't written enough. Writing lots of pages has always been pretty easy for me. I could never get a job being only a writer, though, because I still don't write well. But by thinking about these tips, and trying to follow them myself, I have gotten to the point where I can make writing work for me and my career.

The Myth of the Evil Editor

Another evergreen, this one by Victoria Strauss [on July 16, 2010](#) at *Writer Beware*.

Recently, in an online conversation touching on self-publishing, a self-published writer commented on how happy she is that her books are truly her own--published exactly as she intended them, not mutilated or adulterated by some big publishing house editor whose main goal is to turn out cookie-cutter authors. When I replied that I've worked with

three editors at five large publishers over the course of seven novels, and have never had my work mutilated or adulterated, much less transformed into a cookie, she told me that I was “very lucky,” for she knew of many writers who’d had the opposite experience.

I didn’t ask her who those writers were. If I had, I suspect I would have gotten a vague response about a friend of a friend, or an article she’d seen at some point, or some other form of non-first-hand information. Like the fear of theft, the idea that the main function of publishing house editors is to turn books into clones, and that authors who publish “traditionally” can expect to have their manuscripts slashed and burned in callous disregard of their original voices and intents, is largely unfounded. Nevertheless, it’s quite common. I’ve often seen it used to justify a choice to self-publish (“I want my book to remain MY BOOK!”), or presented as one of the reasons why self-publishing is superior.

Well...yes and no. In my case, line editors have almost always improved my work, but there have also been cases where suggested changes would have messed things up (and the case where an acquisitions editor wanted an entirely different book). And while magazine editors have improved my writing probably 80% of the time (in another 15-20%, there hasn’t really been much editing), there was one—and only one—case where the change of a word *substantially* changed the meaning of a column. And there are clearly “bad” editors out there, but probably not a lot of them.

Worth reading in any case, even though some of the commenters seem to see this as an excuse to bash self-publishing (Strauss does not do so: she’s fine with self-publishing but trying to help writers avoid scam/vanity/subsidy publishers.)

I’ll quote part of one comment from someone who vehemently disagrees with Strauss and self-publishes because editors would just mess up His Golden Words, which he presumably edits in a comment as well as in his books:

I will stand up for the other side and say that I loathe editors, especially those who say only that this is wrong or that is wrong, never what is write.

That’s the lead sentence. He later drops into all-caps to strengthen his superb, unalterable, always “write” case.

How to Write a Book

I found this odd mix of good advice, selectively useful advice and, well, stuff that’s less so interesting enough to cite it (by Michael Lopp [on June 28, 2010](#) at *Rands in Repose*—and it took too much clicking to ascertain that first fact).

I’m going to jump right to the punch line. I’m going to start by telling you exactly what you need to do to finally write that book you’ve promised yourself for the past three years. Are you sitting down? Good.

Don't write a book. Even better, stop thinking about writing a book. Your endless internal debate and self-conjured guilt about that book you haven't written yet is a sensational waste of your time. My guess is if you took all the time that you've spent considering writing a book and translated that into actual writing time, you'd be a quarter of your way into writing that book you're not writing.

So, stop. It's the only sure-fire way to begin.

Those are the first three paragraphs. They *may* be useful for some would-be writers. They are also 100% absolutely dead wrong in other cases. For example, neither my first written book-length manuscript nor my first published book, the latter being one of the two most important I've ever written, would *ever* have happened if I hadn't set out to write a book.

But he's also right in some cases: getting hung up on *The Book* can keep you from making progress toward a useful end. (I'll suggest that for fiction, which Lopp doesn't seem to intentionally write, his advice is almost always wrong: there are big differences in how you'd approach a short story and a novel or novella, and you probably won't want to start in on the longer form without a solid plan *and intent* to get there.)

Perhaps worth noting: Lopp's two books are both related to software management and development. *Two books*: he's an authority!

I dunno. I tend to agree that the most productive move toward writing a book is *actually writing*, but I don't think I agree that most good books—or even most good O'Reilly-style books—are not the books the authors had in mind. Yes, it happens. No, it's not the rule, I don't believe.

Lopp apparently relies heavily on random ideas discovered without planning; that works *for him*. He's also pretty adamant about using TextEdit and *not* using any word processing package—which may be exactly write *for him*. Oh, and he writes in 15p. Sentinel, for what that's worth. (It's a slab-serif face that I had honestly never heard of, but what do I know?)

Oh, and this from a clear authority on book writing:

This is the last piece of advice, and you don't want to hear it because what I'm about to tell you is depressing. If you haven't written a word of your book — if it's just a great title — you are two years away from being anywhere close to done. I base this opinion on entirely unscientific evidence of (almost) having published two books.

Um. Yes, *MARC for Library Use* took two years. None of my other books (15, *not* including self-published ones) have taken close to that long, which may be why I tend not to write authoritative advice.

Still, an interesting and sometimes amusing read. Dozens of comments, including some questions, and it appears that Lopp doesn't respond to comments.

Practical Tips on Writing a Book from 23 Brilliant Authors

Here's another one where I have mixed feelings, both about "brilliant" and about some of the advice, but it's an interesting compilation of tips, put together by Steve Silberman [on June 2, 2011](#) at *NeuroTribes*.

I won't quote extensively from the 23 sets of tips or from the 235 comments and pingbacks, which I did not read in their entirety. I will quote a couple of tips (or portions of tips) that left me bemused or just mystified:

There's no such thing as too many drafts.

Cathartic effect.

Do not read other people's work on the same subject.

For me, it was vitally important that all non-book related reading be as mindless as possible.

That last one starts with two words that remove the strangeness: *For me*.

And, of course, there's lots of possibly-good advice.

How to Build a New York Times Bestseller (or Maybe Not)

What better way to finish this section than with advice from a *New York Times* best-seller author, the inimitable John Scalzi (published [June 21, 2012](#) at *Whatever*)?

When *Redshirts* appeared on the NYT best-seller list, a fan asked "to what do you attribute its success?" and "anything that could be replicated by the rest of us?"

He offers ten responses—and a critical coda. The topic sentences of the responses:

1. I wrote seven other largely successful science fiction novels first...
2. I wrote a commercially accessible book.
3. I wrote a book that didn't suck.
4. I had the support of my publishers and they executed flawlessly in production and promotion.
5. We released a large chunk of the book early and for free (and promoted it).
6. We released the eBook DRM free...
7. Jonathan Coulton wrote [a kick-ass theme song](#).
8. The book came out just ahead of *Father's Day*.
9. I have a big online presence and that allows me to let lots of people know about my upcoming work.
10. This is not the only path, or a guaranteed path, to the NYT list (or to writing success in general).

There's a lot more here, including the fact that Scalzi had two earlier books on the *extended* NYT lists. Then there's the kicker, if point #10 isn't enough:

Also keep in mind that a book can be successful and never chart on a bestseller list. *Old Man's War* is my best-selling book but it didn't get anywhere near the NYT list in any format. All it does is sell, week after week, year after year. Likewise, prior to *Old Man's War*, my most successful book was *Book of the Dumb*, which sold over 100,000 copies, many through Costco and Sam's Club, which at the time the book was

released didn't have their sales sent into BookScan. From the point of view of bestseller lists, it was as if those books were never sold. I still got paid for them, however. Which is nice.

And the close (before a few dozen comments):

Ultimately, I think the secret of *any* success, writing-wise, is just to write the book that you want to write. I didn't write *Redshirts* in a calculated attempt to scale a list; I wrote it because I thought I would have fun writing it and maybe people would have fun reading it. I did, and for the most part it seems people do. In that regard it's a successful book. Everything else, including the NYT list, is frosting on the cake.

Words on the Web

And this time, sigh, I am omitting a piece from the *New Yorker* that I'd love to include because it's the 9th of the month (as I write this) and I have two free articles left...

Stop Pagination Now

Another Farhad Manjoo *Slate* piece, this one [from October 1, 2012](#), and one could only wish... The tease and first three paragraphs:

Why websites should not make you click and click and click for the full story.

Slate's editorial guidelines call for articles to be split into multiple pages once they hit the 1,000-word mark, so I have to keep this brief: Splitting articles and photo galleries into multiple pages is evil. It should stop.

Pagination is one of the worst design and usability sins on the Web, the kind of obvious no-no that should have gone out with blinky text, dancing cat animations, and autoplaying music. It shows constant, quiet contempt for people who should be any news site's highest priority—folks who want to read articles all the way to the end.

Pagination persists because splitting a single-page article into two pages can, in theory, yield twice as many opportunities to display ads—though in practice it doesn't because lots of readers never bother to click past the first page. The practice has become so ubiquitous that it's numbed many publications and readers into thinking that multipage design is how the Web has always been, and how it should be.

So autoplaying music (and video!) has gone away? I must have missed the memo—and these days we get autoplaying animated GIFs of most anything, along with tiresome memes that don't show up entirely until you click through (and realize you just wasted your time, since like most memes these are clever for about one day tops).

As Manjoo says, clickathons are *not* how it's always been: in more innocent times you could get the whole article, or at least a print page's

worth (call it 800-1,000 words), with your first click. But now those articles—especially listicles that tease you with a picture that belongs to #25 out of a 25-item/25-page list—want you to see as many pages and ads as possible.

Pageview juicing is a myopic strategy. In the long run, unfriendly design isn't going to help websites win new adherents, and winning new readers is the whole point of being a website. I bet that if all news sites switched to single-page articles—and BuzzFeed-style scrolling galleries instead of multipage slideshows—they'd experience short-term pain followed by long-term gain. Their articles would get shared more widely and, thus, win more loyal, regular visitors for the publication. In fact, pagination is so horrible that I suspect eradicating it from the Web might also lead to bigger breakthroughs—it would almost certainly solve the Iran nuclear crisis and eliminate the fiscal cliff—but I don't want to make any promises.

Manjoo quotes some of the arguments for pagination, such as this from *Slate's* editor:

Pages that run too long can irritate readers," Plotz said in an email. "We run stories of 2,000, 4,000, even 6,000 words, and to run that much text down a single page can daunt and depress a reader. So pagination can make pages seem more welcoming, more chewable." An editor at another site made a further point that pagination can be a useful signal to readers about the length of an article—if you see an article with 10 pages, you know to set aside a lot of time to read it (or skip it).

I rather like the alternative title that appears as a floating banner over the story (even as I dislike floating banners and the way they affect paging-down in most cases: that is, you miss part of the story):

The contemptuous, myopic, evil practice of breaking online stories into multiple pages.

I now assume that most listicles are primarily ad bait and skip them, just as I assume most "quizzes" are ways to gather personal information and skip them.

Skim this article! How the Internet has ruined your brain for serious reading

WARNING: Click through at your own risk! This Scott Kaufman piece [appeared April 7, 2014](#) at *RawStory*, and given *RawStory's* design, I'm not quite sure whether I've read the whole thing (while navigating around popover ads, autoplaying video, more autoplaying ads, *at least* 45 page elements—ads, photos, promos for other stories—unrelated to this story...

In fact, that site was so screwed up with shifting and autoplaying and apparently fetching and...that it eventually required me to shut down Word and Firefox, on a system that's been quite robust (since I stopped

using Edge and Excel together) and was restarted/refreshed just this morning. So I can only say that what I read basically said that one person makes a claim similar to that (and of course is pushing a book on the subject) and that the dean of an iSchool also thinks it might be true. No clinical evidence, no evidence of any sort, just LOTS OF AUTOPLAYING VIDEO AND A BUTTLOAD OF ADS AND...

The internet isn't harming our love of 'deep reading', it's cultivating it ...and Steven Poole isn't buying the claim, at least in [this April 11, 2014 Guardian](#) piece. Or maybe it's the distinction between "serious" reading—by which I can only assume is meant canonical works like *Middlemarch* and *Crime and Punishment*.

It's a charming discussion that's at least as convincing (and a *lot* more peaceful) than the Kaufman piece. Maybe it's time for me to give the *Guardian* a few bucks to help it maintain its no-paywall policy.

I would comment on the hundreds of comments, but my web-addled brain couldn't take in that much.

The Future of Words

Most items in this area tend to show up in the occasional ebooks-vs.-pbooks roundup, and maybe this is where these belong. To the extent that any of the five source items survive—no, make that four, since one is in a mostly-paywalled source—I hope there's a little more. They all date from 2013, so the "ebooks will conquer all" thinking is probably to be expected.

Hmm. My patience for Clay Shirky and Nicholas Carr has dropped from its already-low level, and I just find "literature is dead/reading is dead" discussions these days, well, deadening. Which leaves me with one, count'em, one piece—one that seems singularly silly in April 2018, and I suspect seemed pretty silly when it appeared.

The big short – why Amazon's Kindle Singles are the future

Not "part of the future" but *the* future—but perhaps Julian Gough didn't write the headline for [this September 5, 2013 story](#) at *The Guardian*. (The URL and page say it appeared in the "books blog" rather than the actual newspaper.)

New formats in literature are rare, and disruptive. They usually accompany a change in technology. [Amazon](#) was the first big player to realise that digitisation would allow for a new literary format. In January 2011, it quietly launched a substore on its US website to sell something it called a Kindle Single: Compelling Ideas Expressed At Their Natural Length, as a press release headline blandly put it.

"Typically between 5,000 and 30,000 words, [Kindle](#) Singles are editorially curated and showcase writing from both new and established

voices – from bestselling novelists and journalists to previously unpublished writers.”

Gough is right in what follows: that’s a tough length to get published—too long for most newspaper and magazine articles (although some magazines do publish very long articles, and what’s left of print science fiction and fantasy magazines frequently feature novelettes and novellas, covering all but the low end of this range).

So a publishing program featuring these lengths is at least interesting. Is it a revolution? Perhaps. A good thing? Absolutely: more flexible forms of fiction are always good.

As for “bookeen,” Gough’s suggested name for these things...ugggh. “*The future*”? Give me a break.

Conversation

A few notes on web-mediated conversations of various sorts.

The Academic Twitterazzi

Steve Kolowich [on October 2, 2012](#) at *Inside Higher Ed*, about the practice of live-tweeting during academic conferences. Since liveblogging and back-channel conversations go back even further than live-tweeting, this is not a new discussion.

“[I]t’s presumptive to assume that we should share other people’s work w/o asking,” wrote @eetempleton, an assistant professor of English.

“I would disagree,” rejoined @alothian, another English assistant professor. “when I speak & others tweet, I learn a LOT about my own ideas.”

Some worried that having someone tweet their insights before they publish might increase the likelihood that they will be scooped by a colleague — although others regarded that notion as slightly paranoid.

A Modern Language Association official says people should respect the wishes of speakers. The dread word “neoliberalism” comes into play. Some heat, little light.

The comments are, I believe, longer than the piece—but didn’t seem to me to say much more.

Speech, Conversation, Debate, Engagement, Communication

To quote Monty Python, and now for something completely different: a set of ten terse points about those five words from John Scalzi [on September 16, 2013](#). These have to do with the First Amendment (indirectly) and the “rules” of engagement.

It’s such a short and pithy piece (yes, it’s a listicle, but no ads and all on one page) that I just point to it and quote the second item:

This freedom of speech also includes the right to choose *not* to speak, and not to speak to whomever, including to you.

Well, I should also note some key items relating to debates/arguments: the fact that someone chooses *not* to argue or debate with you does not mean that you've won the debate.

The brief little post is followed by more than 200 comments; I didn't read them all, but *Whatever* comments are moderated (slightly) and usually add to the discussion.

Engaging in the Public Sphere

Not too many librarians in this extended roundup, but here's one: Wayne Bivens-Tatum [on January 7, 2014](#) at *Academic Librarian*.

A few months ago I met Rick Anderson at a conference. I introduced myself by saying, "I wanted to meet you in person since we argue so much online." Someone with Rick asked, "so who wins the arguments?" I said that nobody ever wins arguments, and Rick followed with a pithy couplet saying the same thing. Pity I can't remember it, because it was catchy and very appropriate. The question some people might have is, if no one ever wins arguments, why does anyone argue? And if we're not arguing, what are we doing?

Answering the first question is easy. We argue because we want to win. People can rationalize it any way they want. They're searching for the truth. They want to "set the record straight." They want to put some schmucks in their place. But almost always, the underlying motive to arguing is to win, and following a fierce argument between worthy competitors will usually take you through a maze of arguments designed to shift the attention to something else whenever things go wrong. "Oh, you think you have me there? Well what about this tenuously related thing you probably don't have a response to? Let's talk about that!" Sometimes this is just tedious. Sometimes it can be fun, like a game. But it's rarely persuasive.

A bit later, WBT offers some possibilities as to what we're doing when we engage issues online, if we're not really arguing:

Depending on the situation, we're doing a number of things. Perhaps foremost, we're telling stories or framing narratives, not in the hope of persuading the opposition, but with the goal of providing a compelling narrative that someone might accept, maybe especially someone who hasn't made a decision on the matter under discussion. In rhetorical terms, we're practicing the three rhetorical appeals: to logos, ethos, and pathos. We lay out reasons for our beliefs (logos). We present ourselves as certain kinds of people (ethos), hopefully the kind of people who are rational, intelligent, considerate, even-handed, the kind of people you want to agree with, that you might respect even if you don't like them.

And sometimes, if it's appropriate, we bring in an emotional appeal (pathos).

There's more, and it's well worth reading. Only one comment (and a response from WBT), and it's from an eccentric old geezer, so you can ignore it.

How to Be a Good Commenter

For a strong close to this section, here's John Scalzi [on September 18, 2012](#) at *Whatever*—and note up front that there are 182 comments.

One of the things I'm proud of here at *Whatever* is that the comment threads are usually actually worth reading, which is not always something you get with a site that has as many readers as this one does. Some of this is down to my moderation of the site, and my frequent malleting of trolls/idiots/assbags, but much of it is also down to the generally high standard of commenter here. I do a lot less malleting than I might have to, because the people who frequent here do a fine job at being good commenters.

And I hear you say: Why, I would like to be a good commenter too! Not just here, but in other places where commenting occurs online! Well, of course you do. You're a fine upstanding human being, not some feculent jackass with a keyboard, an internet connection and a blistering sense of personal inferiority that is indistinguishable from common sociopathy.

So for you, I have ten questions to ask yourself before you press the "post comment" button. Yes, ten is a lot. No one said being a good commenter was easy. But the good news is that the more you're a good commenter, the less you'll actually have to think about being one before you type. It becomes a habit, basically. So keep at it.

I'll just quote the ten questions, without the eminently readable and worthwhile commentary Scalzi provides—and note that what goes for comments also goes for most online (and perhaps offline) discussions. (You do know that "malleting" is Scalzi's version of moderating, wielding his Mallet of Loving Correction? Which he uses lightly.)

1. Do I actually have anything to say?
2. Is what I have to say actually *on* topic?
3. Does what I write actually *stay* on topic?
4. If I'm making an argument, do I actually know how to make an argument?
5. If I'm making assertions, can what I say be backed up by actual fact?
6. If I'm refuting an assertion made by others, can what I say be backed up by fact?
7. Am I approaching this subject like a thoughtful human being, or like a particularly stupid fan?
8. Am I being an asshole to others?
9. Do I want to have a conversation or do I want to win the thread?
10. Do I know when I'm done?

Read those questions again. (Go [read the post](#), if you haven't already done so,) Think about it the next time you're about to engage in a discussion. (I particularly like the discussion on #10.)

Some of the comments (after the few mandatory rule breakers) are interesting. One is deeply mysterious:

I disagree with most of your impressionistic/aesthetic preferences regarding what makes a good commenter and comment thread, though the first 3 or so are good.

Whew. So by this person's lights not knowing what you're talking about (5 and 6), keeping going indefinitely (9 and 10) and being an asshole are all just fine approaches for commenting? I'll stay away from that person's blog...

And that's as good a place to finish as any.

A note along the way: one cluster just disappeared entirely, for three good reasons. 1. I can't figure out what my abbreviated tag actually meant. 2. All but one of the pieces just seemed irrelevant. 3. The remaining one, calling on us all to read slowly. read literature, and "mostly classics," just told me I was now too damn old to be listening to people telling me What Books I *Should* Be Reading. Another (two miscellaneous items) was cut for length—and in one case because language,

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Masthead

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