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Pelikan’s Antidisambiguation — Emerging Technologies

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Hello — This column’s name stems from the fact that I stand firmly, as a matter of principle, against “disambiguation.” If disambiguation is a word, then there must be a verb somewhere (in the infinitive), “to ambiguous.” If that is true, then I missed something somewhere. If there is no such verb, then why must we hear of it? At any event, I’m against it, and therefore, my position is one of Antidisambiguation.

This column will discuss emerging technologies. Amidst the marketing hype, the techno-babble, and the outrageous and continuing generation of terms-nouvelle, there are sometimes deep currents at work: trends that we overlook at our peril.

Column #1 — “Sell ‘em the Razor, Then sell ‘em the Blades, too!”

Ever-present on Amazon’s home page, but not-so-commonly-actually-seen, Amazon’s Kindle has crept into a moment of prominence in the mainstream attention span lately. The reason? Amazon has announced the Kindle 2.

In the meantime, Sony introduced a new version of their Reader quite recently (the PRS-700), appearing to respond to user feedback through the inclusion of a backlighting system for the now touch-sensitive screen.

The original Kindle and Sony’s PRS-505 (PRS stands for “Portable Reader System”), have been in general circulation for well over a year. Yet even now, to be caught actually using one is to invite comment or questions such as, “Is that one of those eBook readers?” (No, it’s a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich.) How do you like it?” (I love it. In fact, I was reading on it when you interrupted me.)

Working in Penn State’s Emerging Technologies Group, I have spent quite a bit of time with both the Kindle and the Sony Reader. While that both Amazon and Sony seem to be concentrating on the individual user, widespread personal adoption may present us with organizational or institutional possibilities. Gazing into the crystal ball, what might fit into our Antidisambiguation.

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Working in Penn State’s Emerging Technologies Group, I have spent quite a bit of time with both the Kindle and the Sony Reader. While that both Amazon and Sony seem to be concentrating on the individual user, widespread personal adoption may present us with organizational or institutional possibilities. Gazing into the crystal ball, what might we see for institutional and library support and services? There’s much to discuss here. In this first column I’ll take a look at the positioning going on as Amazon and Sony vie for the personal market. Next time, I’ll go deeper into how such devices, and others, and the content they all feed on, might fit into our existing and emerging institutional information infrastructures.

A genuine old-fashioned book-loving book lover, I have found both the Kindle and the Sony Reader to be absolutely wonderful. Most remarkable is the degree of verisimilitude they both achieve — you quickly forget the device itself, thanks in large part to the component they have in common: the amazing electrophoretic display from E Ink Corporation.

The Sony Reader lacks the wireless delivery of content (via Sprint’s cellular network) that lies at the center of the Kindle’s feature set. You have to connect the Sony Reader to a computer to move content onto it.

The real question is this: why are these devices still rare enough to attract comment when seen in public?

Both Amazon and Sony, it appears to me, have chosen to target their marketing efforts for eBook readers at the typical member of the “Brie and Chablis” crowd. Who is this person? He or she is an affluent, frequently traveling professional, a book-lover who listens to NPR, continued on page 10