At Brunning: People and Technology-At the Only Edge that Means Anything/How We Understand What We Do

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Recommended Citation

Brunning, Dennis (2010) "At Brunning: People and Technology-At the Only Edge that Means Anything/How We Understand What We Do," Against the Grain: Vol. 22: Iss. 4, Article 27.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5615

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Where the Wild Things Are: eBook Summer 2010
Summer of 42 or Summer of the VuVuZela?

Compared to Summer 2009, a feast of e-reader and e-seller, where publishing’s future teetered and tottered over the Google Book Settlement and each week it seemed brought yet another Nook, Kindle, Sony, BeBook reader device into market, this summer’s pace is slower almost slow motion. Nothing has happened in the “settlement”; publishers push and shove at the negotiation table and in the blogosphere/news environment. Whither publishers? Whither authors? Whither librarians?

Oh, wait, Amazon announced a new Kindle model with 3G and WIFI at lower prices joining the already millions of units sold; it’s also slimmer — yawn. But Amazon did announce Kindle sales had edged ahead of same-edition hard covers. And users of all devices have been seen enjoying eBooks in every nook and cranny of the connected world. Perhaps it is the summer of the VuVuZela for eBooks, a persistent, nagging hum that won’t disappear.

Hmmm...let’s explore the summer eBook world.

The Shape of Things to Come...

Google is betting the browser to become the de facto reading medium. As long as your device can run a Web browser Google will supply an electronic edition using the open source e-pub standard. The Google Bookstore will supply titles from the library digitization project, publisher-supplied content, and free Web content. Google’s goal will be, as always, to match advertising to searches while helping users find books wherever they are sold on the Internet.

Over at Apple, Steve Jobs has bet the orchard on iPProducts — primarily the iPad and iPhone. If you haven’t had the chance, drop by your local trendy coffee/Internet hub and check out the over-coffeenated, always on Apple boys and girls, putting the collective finger to content on their iToys. It is quite the experience and impressive. Visually, Apple outsells Kindle. There are reading apps that display your books on virtual library shelves; with a light touch you can turn pages just as you would in its print doppelganger. Publishers can enhance the reading experience with elaborate zooming features and hyperlinking to secondary references.

Ironically many iPad users — who also like Kindle eBook pricing, catalog, and availability — use Amazon’s iPad app for a very satisfying reading experience. The app is basically a rework of the Windows app for the iPad. Here Kindle content looks more like a book; there are few, if any, rendering issues that mar reading on the original device.

Yet with all this emphasis on device we may not want to lose sight of what is really going on. Your reader, whichever you choose, needs books, and these books will be variously priced and may even offer an array of features. Plus, you got to get the books on and off your reader.

Amazon owns a huge head start in selling eBooks. For several years now they’ve set the price and reading expectation. Moreover, they are keeping pace with the competition in lowering device price. And taking a lesson from publishers they are now signing exclusive publishing deals for electronic editions, having recently signed an agreement with author agent Phillip Wylie to be the distributor for major authors including Mailer, Updike, Roth — you know, what you read in 20th Century American Novel classes.

At the moment, no other online bookstore has the pricing, device simplicity, and exclusivity Amazon has set up.

So we know what Amazon is doing — making books on devices, content, and authors. When not apologizing for the iPhone 4 antennae, we know that Steve Jobs is smiling all the way to the bank with million plus sales of the iPad. Owners have all the online media they want. They deserve this after forking over more than $700 and waiting in real or virtual lines.

A lesson from all this: eBookstore may be as important as device.

We would be remiss to not mention Book Liberator. If you haven’t heard of this personal book scanning machine, check it out. Designed as a less than $350.00 (with camera) book scanner for your tabletop, its inventors and supporters feel it may turn the publishing world upside down. They propose to unpulp pulp.

It looks like a man-sized Rubic’s cube without, well, the rubes. Or a magician’s box with clear plexiglass sides. In essence, it is a book and camera stand fitted living inside a clear plastic box. The box lowers down on an open page and flattens it for photographing.

It is labor intensive. The operator must turn pages, raise and lower the box, and take a photo.

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Nine of ten librarians we’ve shown the video to believe this demo to be an April Fool’s joke. Perhaps this trend down to the general population. Both librarians and nonlibrarians remark that it would take forever to scan even a small collection.

On the wild side, are librarians forever?

The Kindle (apologies to William Blake)

Kindle, oh my old Kindle, shining grayscale bright Easy on our reading eyes In the forest of e-ink night What other reader device Could give me so much convenient reading delight? From what distant server Flow your delicate pixels From what dedicated provider Wing your words? Oh, right, Whispersync.

On what shoulder and what art
Could design your sleek and electronic heart?
And when did you begin to peak
Beyond hardcover sales, yes, this week
Publishing never will be the same.
What bookstore will thee drain
What author will thee reward or pain
And when print is set free through your $9.99 fee
What publisher will thee agency?
When Apple and Google throw down their spears
And inundated Random House with fears
Did Bezos, did he smile with commercial glee
And add more discount to the pricing melee
Did he smile, did he smile?

Kindle, Kindle shining just right
In the forest of e-ink light
Will you forever be?
Will you last beyond your first battery?
Will it be for ten hours or maybe just three?
And vanquish to eternity what we are calling P?

1492 All Over Again

What is our off-season? Do we have an off button? How do we refresh?

While most professions view Summer as vacation, a time to renew, refresh, and relax, librarians, of all persuasions, trapse to unusually summary settings to review, recommend, and reveal to one another

And when did you begin to peak
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From the war zone
(aka The Charleston Advisor)...

In Q&A Jane Burke, CEO of SerialsSolutions, summoned troops (librarians it would appear) to the truly unified experience of the Ann Arbor via Seattle company’s discovery services. Unlike competition, who Burke claimed still depended on federated search and merging results, Summon stood alone as preharvesting content to one index. This, Burke argued, had a tremendous impact on speed and quality of results. Moreover, it wasn’t repurposed, it was new.

Understandably, Burke’s competitors took issue with this king of the hill position. In letters to The Charleston Advisor, Tim Collins, President of EBSCO Publishing and Nancy Dushkin, Corporate Vice President for Discovery & Delivery Solutions at Ex Libris wrote, each at some length, contrarian views. Their voices blended into a singular, should we say, unified voice, that their indexes were equally one and unified across library content.

They did not, they emphatically insisted, miss the content harvest.

As for “repurposed products” Collins was direct. Based on usability studies and years of gathering customer feedback, EBSCO designed its discovery service to leverage a familiar user interface, their flagship platform EBSCOhost. The value of this, Collins maintained, provided users with a familiar interface, a no “retraining” product.

Collins went on to provide Ms. Burke with a teachable moment. For clarity’s sake, he suggested a baseline definition of discovery service which is a collection of locally-indexed metadata available from a single search. EBSCO Discovery Services is exactly this and does not rely on federation. Collins goes on to wonder aloud if Ms. Burke is confusing EBSCOHost Integrated Search with EBSCOhost Discovery Service. EIS is for customers who want to add federation seamlessly to their overall solution. Why? Simple, not all content is available for the index.

Nancy shared Tim’s concerns and mainly supported his themes — with examples from Primo Central. Ex Libris launched Primo Discovery and Delivery Solution after thoroughly researching end user needs. Like Summon and EDS, Primo’s index covers scholarly materials shared by the global scholarly community and integrates searching this index across a library’s services. Like any large-scale distributed system, it is quick and with relevance ranking and blending of results very efficient. It is, in just a few words, not federated searching.

With Collins, Nancy also noted not all collections are available for harvesting and indexing for several reasons including commercial considerations, compatibility issues, and other obstacles.

For a truly unified scholarly index, she concludes all publishers must come on board with centralized indexes.

So there it is, a fundamental truth in this discovery business. Unless all publishers come on board to expose (or disclose) meta-data, there just isn’t going to be universal discovery.

However, each may have found a New World.