Pelikan's Antidisambiguation-Catching Up

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Send ideas by July 31, 2013, to any of the Conference Directors listed above.

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A new year has begun, and with it, my return to Against The Grain, following an absence beginning in October. This issue’s column began as “catching up….” — observations collected over the period that didn’t make it into columns not produced during my absence. It has coalesced, however, into less of a laundry list and more of just a few pointed comments.

My absence was the result of fusion surgery to repair three vertebrae in my lumbar spine. The doctors did a marvelous job, horsing things to repair three vertebrae in my lumbar spine. More of just a few pointed comments.

So, for several months I observed the world, in all honesty, from an even more bemused point of view than I normally do.

During this period I pulled out several reading projects that had been sitting in the “if I ever manage to get the time” category for seemingly forever. For one, I re-read Churchill’s history of the Second World War. I had read it once before, and that was in my twenties. I got a lot more out of it this time.

An aside: the impact of encountering Churchill’s writing once again was enormous! The man could use the language! Modern form seems laughably crude in comparison, especially after a period of immersion in Churchill’s information-dense, nuanced, meaty prose! And most astonishing of all: Churchill, it seems, managed to write his monumental works on his own. That he could do this and keep up with his email, his tweets, his blog, and his texting is astonishing! (uh….)

I also listened to music, watched some great movies, old and new, and revisited some favorite 1960s television. Basically, I consumed the output of others, in several media, and tried to keep from going mad from inactivity.

This, of course, provided the opportunity (read: excuse) to get my hands onto a new “best buddy,” in this case, a Kindle Fire HD, the 7-inch model. Yes, I parachuted myself right into Amazon’s ecosystem and handed myself over saying, “Alright, you guys can watch me reading and listening and watching — just keep the content coming and so easy to get at!” After these many weeks of heavy use the conclusion is inescapable: for the consumption of the works of others, and those works in several media, this is a near-perfect purpose-built solution.

One certainly wouldn’t want to write Moby Dick on a Kindle Fire HD, but reading on it is a pleasure. And Amazon makes sure there are no obstacles to getting more content. Imagine that. They seem to have some idea what they’re doing. I wonder where they get the money to develop all this great stuff.

Then, long about six weeks post-op, it became time to start thinking about a gradual, very cautious, very tentative return to activity. As I began to reach outward again, I quickly discovered that even my very light laptop was still far too much to handle. Just the act of lifting it from a bedside table provided an immediate lesson in the limits of comfortable leverage. So that brought up the matter of finding a more content-creation-oriented device than the 7-inch Amazon tablet.

After some casting about for a “business-suited” tablet, I took the suggestion of a co-worker and checked out the new Google Nexus 10.
Future Dates for Charleston Conferences

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What does this mean for the content creation and marketing industries? For one thing, it adds new data points to an industry’s understanding of targeted demographic groups. If “one size does not fit all” among the consuming parties, then those who package content up had better be ready to offer more than just “Analog” and “Digital” or “Desktop” and “Mobile.” This has been true of smart Web design for years, of course. The need to separate presentation from content has been understood for more than a decade, at least, by anyone taking a strategic view of Web design. Holdouts persist, of course, and appallingly poor design, such as static page widths, or static object widths within non-static page widths, are easy to find.

Some very fine bad examples can be found among higher education (cough), whereas providers of commercial content seem to find incentive to move forward.

Folks in the future will look back in amazement that it took us so long to figure this stuff out — although they may nod understandably when they realize we were creating the content a lot faster than we could fix it, and once created, we mostly just left it there to rot. Retrospective conversion of content remains hugely expensive. I have a feeling, though, that our failure as content providers to fix past errors contributes to a very bad impression on the part of our content consumers.

I hasten to add: such faux pas are not exclusively confined to the halls of the academy. For example, in creating the Kindle versions of a book I was reading, the editors seem to have taken whatever came out of their OCR software (Optical Character Recognition) and just dumped it in a file and put it on the market without any human oversight or intervention whatsoever. The frequency of mistakes, typos, and mangled text is inexcusable. I’d gladly have paid more for clean output. Publishers, please don’t foist off this sloppy work on us this way!

Meantime, there has been no shortage of industry news, speculation, and downright ballyhoo to wade through. I could write several columns based upon the past few months but have decided just to mention a few things in passing here, assuming that by the time this column reaches print, we’ll already be facing even more and better news, speculation, and downright ballyhoo.

So take any of what follows here for what interest or applicability as it may convey...

Everyone seems to recognize the commoditization of information about Web-user behavior — the true source of funding for the Web. Amazon and Google clearly understand, practically giving away hardware, software, and services of truly impressive capability, if you’ll just let them gather data about what you do with their hardware, software, and services. Then, they either market to you directly based upon your behavior, or offer their insights for sale to others who, in turn, market to you directly. Never has the web been more clearly understood, practically commoditized, and these are still the Early Days!

I recall seeing, some time back, information regarding the size of the metadata payload associated with a Twitter tweet, as compared to the size of the tweet itself. This came back up again recently, along with a set of pertinent links that I’ll convey to you here, in a kind of Luddite, pulp-based re-tweet…

Here we go —

http://readwrite.com/2011/11/16/what_a_tweet_can_tell_you — from readwrite.com, “What a tweet can tell you” unveils the metadata fields accompanying a tweet. Note the emphasis on the social networking: who’s doing what while following whom. A single data point seems little enough, but put a few million together...

Did I say a FEW million? That brings us to the Library of Congress’s Tweet Archive. I’m sure this is old news to many, but I found it engaging to contemplate the idea of an archive of 170 Million Tweets — and growing! Find the C-Net story at http://news.cnet.com/8300-1023_3-57562210-93/library-of-congress-digs-in-to-full-archive-of-170-billion-tweets/.

This is probably one of those times that it’s quickest simply to drop a search such as “C-Net Library of Congress tweets” into your favorite search engine (it’s ok — they won’t tell…)


And just think — I haven’t even mentioned Facebook — whoops! Just did.

So that’s it until next time. Keep behaving out there, folks! Surf! Search! Download! Post! Tweet! Your behavior drives the market forward!

http://www.against-the-grain.com