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

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Where the Wild Things Are  
Ebooks in 2013  
What would we do without the Pew Research Center? In the saga that is growth and decline in the disrupted world of the Internet, they provide much needed data for what’s happening online. Without Pew surveys, bloggers and journalists would have nothing. NOTHING.

Well, not exactly. While Pew surveys the public, other more commercial data crunchers are adopting and adapting their audience research methods to evaluate users and use more accurately for their commercial accounts. Taken together these surveys help map what’s going on in our reading habits, especially how we read.

Since Amazon introduced Kindle in 2008, Pew and Nielsen surveys have shown a steady increase in the use of e-readers, purchase of e-editions of books, and growth in the use of reading apps on a variety of computing devices. A tipping point was reached in 2011 when Amazon, never terribly open about sales figures, reported first edition purchases of e-editions surpassed those of hardcover. It meant that there were enough Kindles, customers, and Kindle editions to turn upside down the traditional model of expensive hardcover release followed by paperback editions. In a flat industry and flat economy, ebooks showed promise.

This raised a few eyebrows in the publishing industry. It meant that ebooks were challenging growth in the consumer trade market. Even if the writing wasn’t on the wall, that wall had been tagged.

In 2013, with data gathered from the 2012 retail year, we are again confronted how wild this world is. In sales, Nielsen BooksScan reports that decline in overall print book sales has stabilized at 9% of total revenues — the same decline observed in 2011. In opinion, Pew surveyed book readers and found that 89 percent of regular book readers report they’ve read a print book within the last year, while only 30 percent said that they had read an eBook in the same time period.

Friend of libraries, Nicholas Carr, author of The Shallows — a book about how the Internet is making us dumb — has an interesting take on this in a WSJ piece. In an extremely non-Fahrenheit 451 spirit, Carr feels that the last few years the early adopters made their move on the e-reader and eBook, especially in light reading of consumer fiction. By definition, these are the “most disposable of books,” so why not buy them in the most disposable way?

Another type of reader, Carr argued, buys and reads differently:

“Readers of weightier fare, including literary fiction and narrative nonfiction, have been less inclined to go digital. They seem to prefer the heft and durability, the tactile pleasures, of what we still call “real books” — the kind you can set on a shelf…”

Carr concludes we have to consider that reading — and the publishing that supplies it — serves many purposes and that the Gutenberg Revolution is still the one going on albeit with a digital chapter. In 2013 academic publishers may tac into the eBook’s fickle breeze.

Beall Street Blues  
Recently librarians have been in the legal news. They’ve received letters from lawyers representing publishers. Dale Askey, a librarian at McMaster’s University in Ontario, Canada, is being sued for alleged damages to the reputation and profits of a Canadian scholarly publisher. Another, Jeffrey Beall who coined the term “predatory open-access publishers” and manages a Website devoted to identifying whom he thinks fits this description, has been sternly asked in an attorney’s letter, to stop what he is doing to the attorney’s client, an open-access publisher.

Mr. Beall and Mr. Askey have not said much publicly which is smart and what their legal advisers have told them.

For a moment the library Web community lit up with anger, chagrin, fear, and advice for these potential defendants. Overall, the mood was shock.

Askey’s case revolves around whether a librarian can write in a public forum negatively about a publisher’s products. A publisher, Edward Mellen Press felt libeled by a blog post. Liability aside, some of this publisher’s authors expressed concern that their writing and qualifications might have been damaged by the negatively reviewed company. They considered their writing good and the publisher did what all publishers do: it published good writing.

The problem may be the review went beyond literary or product criticism to a general indictment of the publisher. The claim wasn’t that just one product or a few were bad but all the books published were bad. Guilt by association.

Mr. Beall’s predicament is that an open access publisher doesn’t like being listed on Beall’s list of predatory open access publisher. This list appears on Mr. Beall’s blog with criteria and comment on why the publisher is listed.

We sense the publisher doesn’t see an even playing field when such lists are on the public Web. And it may revolve around the word “predatory.” This is not a nice or unemotional word and Beall probably chose it for its lack of nuance. When you have a predator in your midst you call the cops, pull out your weapon, protect your family. You take on strength because the predator is focusing all energies and efforts at preying on the weak.

Now many publishers support critical reviews in their journals. These reviews warn us about products or services we should not engage because we risk some problem. These are usually about product quality, misinformation about what the product does, or its general price to whatever we buy it for value.

Perhaps Mr. Askey and Mr. Beall should publish in higher quality publications like American Libraries or Library Journal. Or even Consumer Reports. They should avoid the “everything goes” side of the new media — the blogs and the reading community. A good editor could make either of them bullet-proof in this battle for quality in academic publishing.

Across the Carpet and into the Stacks  
I love the stacks, I don’t know why; I don’t get there often. Roaming the stacks is what I get there often. Roaming the stacks is what I may want to do as my last act. Or if heaven is as we imagine, I want heaven to be a library with infinite rows of shelves and even more books. Nothing would go overdue and the acquisition budget would be bottomless.

I don’t know exactly where our library’s building is. I may have been told but it makes as much sense to me as knowing exactly where an Amazon or Wal-Mart warehouse is.
be just down the street; I may pass it every day in my commute.

We’ve delivered many books and journals to off-site storage or what we call High-Density Storage. I recall we had a naming contest and I guess this won. Or our suggestions were, unlike Google’s, that simply didn’t click.

Like Amazon, we deliver in a day. And better than Amazon Prime, we deliver at no cost. The fee is a more obscure price — a debt we’ve paid to space by moving books from the premises. Our books are now diamonds in the rough, awaiting the premises.

That a book be plucked out of the pile our memory, a memory recorded in digital database zeros and ones, ought to grant that book a new shelf life. We ought to lend the book in perpetuity to its ardent re-discoverer, no matter what rank or status on campus, so he or she will have books near to them again. Yes, create a shadow shelf network in the offices and rooms of our users, a Napsterish peer-to-peer storage system.

I’ve always suspected the big gun libraries that lent many of their books to Google for scanning into the Google Library Project, did so for housekeeping and not scholarly reasons. They needed to make room for more books or fewer books and more space for learning, tutoring, teaching, and refreshment centers. Once you have scanned copy you can index it and once you index it you can store it and once you compare with other similar databases of holdings, you can weed it.

No matter how horrific or unpleasant Mao’s reeducation programs must have been because they were secret, brainwashing, and framed in the logic of doing what was right, these present-day efforts of moving the books away from shelves, may feel to some of us like a reeducation effort. What once was our comfortable world of library shelves teeming with books, deep in scholarly journals, and piled with government documents, has become the clinical environment of searching a database for an online copy, while never having to take the walk up the stairs and into the stacks.

I’ve just returned from the PS call number range, my arms stacked with a pile of present-day American authors. Six or so novels and poetry books from writers I remember as present-day American authors. Six or so novels and poetry books from writers I remember as present-day American authors. Six or so novels and poetry books from writers I remember as present-day American authors. Six or so novels and poetry books from writers I remember as present-day American authors.

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