September 2013

Pelikan's Antidisambiguation: The End of the Wax Cylinder as We Know It

Michael P. Pelikan
Pennsylvania State University, mpp10@psu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation
Pelikan, Michael P. (2013) "Pelikan's Antidisambiguation: The End of the Wax Cylinder as We Know It," Against the Grain: Vol. 25: Iss. 4, Article 43.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6595

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
Pelikan’s Antidisambiguation — “The End of the Wax Cylinder as We Know It...”

Column Editor: Michael P. Pelikan (Penn State) <mnp10@psu.edu>

A t the time of this writing, technology news sites, those concerned with literature and publishing (not necessarily the same thing, about which, more later...), and the various industry-centric and literary-focused neighborhoods of the blogosphere are inundated with a flood of digital ink, pouring out into the crator seemingly created by the court case involving Apple, some prominent publishers, and their response to the ascendency of Amazon.

Initial reactions have been extremely “peaky,” shot out like spikes, like blow gun darts dipped in curare.

A July 11th posting by Marcus Wohlson on Wired’s Website was entitled, “Apple’s Court Loss Could End the Book as We Know It.” http://www.wired.com/business/2013/07/apple-amazon-book-prices/


I’m writing this very carefully. For one thing, by the time these words reach print, things may have evolved, or died down. For another, I can’t know the precise landscape that will have emerged by that time: these words must be written in ignorance of that.

What I can try to do, however, is to step back from the edgy precipices that seem to have opened up before the feet of many of these commentators, and try to offer a measured reflection on what happens in content industries as they evolve. As ever, we can learn from historical patterns.

Been to a record store lately? What has the impact been of the “End of the 45 RPM Single as We Know It?” Well. What about the wax cylinder?

When Ed- ison (whom most would agree was something of a visionary) sang “Mary had a little lamb” into his new invention, (presumably after having entered into a royalty agreement with the copyright holder) he did not foresee the impact Radio, let alone the Internet, would have on the consumption of audio content. His ultimate interest at the time was to create a wholly new manufacturing industry centered on the creation and distribution of audio content on patented and exclusively controlled media: those wax cylinders.

Please note: there was already such a thing as music — he didn’t invent that. There was musical notation. Music was primarily distributed as music — he didn’t invent that. There was musical notation. Music was primarily distributed as music — he didn’t invent that. There was musical notation. Music was primarily distributed as...
Certainly, one would wish for a high-quality equipment employing these breakthroughs. copies (discs — flat — records — "as we knew his medium. to an erosion in the sales of music captured in of capture, manufacturing, distribution, and reproduction forever, nor could he prevent the right to profit from that particular form of music industry. But regarding another facet of Quality: the production of pulp paper, and that was a nineteenth-century development. Its result was an explosion in the numbers and variety of things being printed, from newspapers to scholarly (or some not-so-scholarly) journals to "serious" books to trashy stuff intended for mass, popular consumption (pulp fiction). For the publishers, it marked the beginning of a toga party that would last well over a hundred years. Carnegie built all those libraries to house the stuff for the people. Literacy rates soared. Librarians were at the forefront of the idea that what a person read was a matter of personal, and private, choice.

The irony must never be overlooked: the cheap pulp-based paper brought about the explosion in publication. But what did the medium itself mean to the question of Quality? For content, the proliferation of pseudo-scientific claptrap necessitated the establishment of the doctrine of Peer Review. Additionally, the mass-marketers learned the delightful financial benefits to accrue by following the maxim in content selection, “Give the People What They Want.”

But regarding another facet of Quality: the production of pulp-based paper, having employed acid to break down the pulp fibers in manufacturing, resulted in the creation of a huge body of printed material — basically as huge as all printed material itself — that would self-destruct. Before WordStar, short of microfilm, there was no archival storage medium for all that content. Not that there ever was. Of all written material — the ideas, the expressions, the instruction, the records, the dreams, from all those centuries prior to the pulp paper era — we will literally never know all that was lost.

We have what we have, ultimately, because it has been handed down through a continuing process of migration, translation, and preservation. It has never been about the artifacts — not with the medium. must not, ever, be fundamentally confused with the mean to the question of Quality? For content, the proliferation of pseudo-scientific claptrap necessitated the establishment of the doctrine of Peer Review. Additionally, the mass-marketers learned the delightful financial benefits to accrue by following the maxim in content selection, “Give the People What They Want.”

But regarding another facet of Quality: the production of pulp-based paper, having employed acid to break down the pulp fibers in manufacturing, resulted in the creation of a huge body of printed material — basically as huge as all printed material itself — that would self-destruct. Before WordStar, short of microfilm, there was no archival storage medium for all that content. Not that there ever was. Of all written material — the ideas, the expressions, the instruction, the records, the dreams, from all those centuries prior to the pulp paper era — we will literally never know all that was lost.

We have what we have, ultimately, because it has been handed down through a continuing process of migration, translation, and preservation. It has never been about the artifacts — not in the final analysis. Yes, we need something to mirror, but that must never be confused with or equated, to the epochal eb and flow of the fortunes of specific industrial sectors or merchandisers.

From time unremembered, the reason to write something was so that it might be read. The “Book as We Know It” is a fairly young thing. The search for gold is far older.