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

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## At the Only Edge that Means Anything / How We Understand What We Do

by **Dennis Brunning** (Director, The Design School Library, Arizona State University) <dennis.brunning@gmail.com>

### As if...

We were sleeping and...in 2015 we woke up and discovered Facebook executives realized the leading social media company employed people who needed empathy training. Facebook senior management has created empathy teams to re-jigger corporate culture to get the brilliant geeks to understand their users. Staff will call Registered users “people.” **Mark Zuckerberg** and **Sharon Sandberg** leaned in and felt this linguistic tweak will humanize Facebook’s decidedly socially adverse programmers.

It’s surprising that the preeminent social media company, whose revenues come from people friending people and liking what they are liking, catches up to empathy in 2015. EQ, emotional quotient, has come and gone as a business buzzword, peaking in popularity in the years following the best seller *EQ: Intelligence Quotient* by **Daniel Goleman**. I believe all of us were carrying around that book in 2005. We are dialed into the close connection of empathy and EQ. It could be called Empathy Quotient.

Yes, so 2005. Facebook was in its infancy then, recently released as “thefacebook.” The platform became Facemash and young beautiful **Harvard** students could vote on the looks, good or bad, of other **Harvard** students. It was a Web version of a bar game played on college campuses — since forever.

So it’s not hard to figure out why empathy took a while to take root at Facebook. Everyone is rich at the company or well paid. They are geeks who code the friendship economy; they are as social as cubicle culture allows. They engage and interact virtually in an asocial virtual world. Facebook money can create enormously alienated and exaggerated social distance that MBPS doesn’t improve.

In libraries we do not make enough money to enjoy Facebook-style lives; we do not expect to. So empathy is currency because it’s as free as the air we breathe and easily practiced. It helps to be humble, gracious, flexible, focused on how a student feels as well as thinks. We don’t need empathy teams to tell us to play nice with the kids. We arrived late to the Web 2.0 revolution. Empathy comes easier at our pay grade.

Part of Facebook’s empathy up strategy is calling users people. They now call daily average users — a keenly counted daily metric — as daily average people. It doesn’t take an empathetic listener to know how wrong this is. It just doesn’t sound right. Most anyone would understand this and we can be sure smart Facebookers either snark out on Tumblr or make EQ jokes when the chief Facebook managers are out of the empathy zone.



### WhatsApp with “people” Facebook? As if...

As if... The world woke up in 2015 and understood the Google menace. Or it was actually late 2014 and the European Economic Union voted to demand that Google Inc. split up — search from advertising, advertising from Apps, Google Cloud from Google Earth. The men and women of Europe — or most of it — concerned with Google’s size and behavior — do not want the millennium Silicon Valley miracle to continue to monopolize search. From the Parthenon in Athens to the Eiffel Tower and beyond they imagine a European cyberspace leveled for fair play.

They’ve got a point, and it may not be limited to the borderless borders of old Europe. Google pretty much can display results because the vote is secret; ballots are counted in a manner only Google knows. And Google isn’t talking. Even if a sovereign country — sort of — has demanded it be so.

The EEU has also asked for the algorithm. Once known as PageRank, Google can, some say, evaluate a million signals given up by Web pages and display the good pages first. Since few of us go beyond the first few links, it’s great competitive advantage to come out Google’s womb first.

In a recent update, codenamed Hummingbird, Google changed its programming not only to drown content farms but also to cleverly display sponsored links. Remember how a few sponsored links would display at the top of results and the rest would line the right side margins of your

screen? No longer. Google has chosen to use new screen space to subtly deliver paid ads. They are clearly marked, and there are only a few. And they blend right into your screen no matter what device is used.

It’s brilliant. The little text ads that made them their first billion did not work well on a smartphone. Heck, they weren’t even there. But now they stream along as smoothly and unctuously as those Facebook ads even spaced in Facebook’s feed.

So Google, while asked to level the playing field, has considerably farmed it to be even more lucrative for them and not so good for everyone else.

Smart. As if one could ask or even demand Google to do anything. Perhaps the EEU should request public service announcement credits from Google for the EEU Websites. As if...

### As if...

I was sleeping in 2014 and did not see this book....*Digital Paper: A Manual for Research and Writing with Library and Internet Materials* by **Andrew Abbott** (**University of Chicago Press**, 2014) is an essential book for all teachers, students, and fact-based writers. In support of writers and as writers themselves, librarians will benefit reading this book and keeping it close.

It’s about research when materials are in print, online, or both. How do you think and write in this environment?

Often, contemporary freshman composition books treat online tools as extensions of print. **Abbott**, a writing professor who has worked in one of the great libraries of the world, has survived his own transition to the online world. He freely admits he’s had the best of circumstances — **University of Chicago’s Regenstein Library** — but he’s also aware and wants the reader/research aware that the **Regenstein** is now everyone’s. *Digital Paper* is all about successfully negotiating this new world.

The introduction alone, his pitch for the book and your reading, is enough to shut up any higher education wonk who believes a library is as only as good as its Wi-Fi service. **Abbott** explains how the modern library melds together old and new, so much so, it may be the most valuable asset on campus and in higher education.

A manual then, a bit of old publishing terminology meets search engine. A primer to guide millennial undergrads and the rest of us from the moment they enter a library, in reality or taking thought to thesis and thesis to paper.

An astounding aspect of *Digital Paper* is the author’s mastery of research skills that often surpass those of librarians. Or more precisely, the library and its publishers prior to Wikipedia and Google Scholar. While we gather in our listservs and conferences to parse the meaning of the zen koan “Do not search but find,” **Abbott** wastes little time and minces few words in going directly to the problem. So many of our publishers are steeped in commercial pursuits whose credibility is eroded, incrementally, by the information and data glut. For instance, he writes briefly of the use of Wikipedia as a decent yet middling encyclopedia, advises us of its role, and moves on. As if... He doesn’t do deals, as some have, of making Wikipedia the starting point of all research.

The disturbing criticism implicit here is that scholarly and scientific publishing is bound to bad and low quality practices. What passes for knowledge and reliable data makes any writer’s work doubly hard. This difficulty isn’t reduced by more technology.

This aside stems from **Abbott’s** thoroughness as a researcher and teacher. The book is about doing research today, in these online and print times. That **Professor Abbott** understands the library better than most of us is a virtue but also advice to all of us.

Kudos for the **University of Chicago** to publish yet another superb book and **Professor Abbott** for sharing his skills, knowledge, his teaching. 🐣