June 2009

Pelikan's Disambiguation -- Of Plate Tectonics and Product Announcements

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. (2009) "Pelikan's Disambiguation -- Of Plate Tectonics and Product Announcements," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 21: Iss. 3, Article 38.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2338>

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 — Of Plate Tectonics and Product Announcements

by **Michael P. Pelikan** (Penn State) <mpp10@psu.edu>

As I begin this third episode of “**Antidisambiguation**,” even as it pours out before my very eyes, I hasten to state that my hopes for this column have never been for it to focus on breaking news in general, or on eBooks, the **Kindle**, or **Google Book Search**, in specific. My aim remains to tease out what we can about currents that run deeper than the gizmology, hyperbole, and lawsuits snatched out of today’s headlines. Resets are popular these days, so let’s reset.

Fascinating as **Amazon** or **Google** or **Apple** product announcements may be to observe, they often (usually) represent purposeful misdirection — much in the same way that any carefully managed public statement is really a very finely tuned, carefully crafted set of words and phrases. By intent, these announcements (pronouncements) are designed to be loaded with nuance, symbolizing much while stating as little as possible in specific, non-retractable terms (that is, if the message wranglers are doing their jobs, and if the big boss doesn’t blow it when he opens his mouth).

In the movies, pigeons suddenly leap en masse into flight before an earthquake. The great fluttering of wings signifies, in the cinematic glossary, that something really big is about to go down, but that most people don’t get it yet. In the movies, pigeons are more in tune with deep under-currents than people, who are stumbling around in a state of consumerism-driven stupor, <irony> hypnotized by their cell phones, their mp3 players, and their eBook readers </irony>.

To extend the analogy, product announcements can be understood as the purposeful release of a pre-designated number of carefully selected pigeons to flight, designed to achieve the appearance of natural excitement on the part of the birds. The leaks that occur in the days or weeks leading up to a product announcement could be seen as the purposeful, “accidental” release of a single, very carefully selected bird or two — or maybe just leaving a curious feather in a place where it’s likely to be discovered and commented upon, “My word! Looks like the tail feather of a previously unknown example of *Raphus cucullatus Amizonicus*!”

If we push this analogy just a little further we arrive at a good working definition for the term “emerging technologies”: changes in the technological landscape inhabited by human beings, viewed as changes in geomorphology over scales of time greater than the prevailing public attention span at any given moment on the time line. My chief interest, then, lies beneath the surface, where the tectonic plates of the product marketplace lithosphere float on the seas of the technological asthenosphere (whose geophysical counterpart, according to *Wikipedia*, “...although solid...can flow like a liquid on geological time scales...”).

Inventors often aim in huge distances. Product developers mete out technological evolution in measured, product life cycle doses. Small wonder that so many product announcements hailed as revolutionary are, in fact, merely evolutionary. As anyone who seeks after the latest and the greatest can tell you, occupancy of the State of the Art is ephemeral, in the most extreme sense of that word:

“lasting or living for a very short time,” (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 10th ed. (A print source!)).

Indeed, why would product marketers want the State of the Art to be anything but ephemeral? What would they do next month? Products already in development under deep cover make the stuff to be announced next month look like last year’s news.

So what can we say, today, at approximately mid-2009, about the immediate and more distant “latest things” that will shape the landscape in which we moil and mine and lumber and strive?

First thing: never assume that a great flapping of wings means something really serious is about to happen. The *really* serious things — by which I mean the things that will royally mess up not our immediate plans or tactics, but actually derail our carefully considered strategy, if not completely overwrite the map of the entire landscape in which we operate — these things move in geological time scales, at least in comparison to product life cycles.

Second thing: nevertheless, and the first thing notwithstanding, the seemingly solid ground upon which entire industries have based themselves, their plans, their hopes, their goals, is moving beneath their feet at every place and in all times — including the present moment in which I write, and the coming present moment in which you read.

Third thing: even though you can’t see this motion on a day to day basis, you can see it if you look over a year or two, a decade or two, or a half century or two.

And finally: technological evolution is tectonic. It *precedes* product. It is almost never “caused” by product, despite the claims of those who, on cue, send birds into flight. The pigeon keepers are not Delphic in vision, they work for the company. They cannot proclaim a revolution, for when such revolutions occur, they occur over time, and almost never can be tied to an individual product release.

A case in point to close: I commented in “**Antidisambiguation #2**” (see *ATG* v.21#2, April 2009, p48) that we frequently overlook the fact that since

at least the mid 1990’s most (nearly all) of the printed textual content in the world has been “born digital,” yet today we have industry world views being turned upside down, either in fact, or in the fantasy of some marketer’s product release plan, by the sudden relevance of eBooks.

The real “event” here, could be said to have begun with the invention of **ASCII** (**American Standard Code for Information Interchange**). **ASCII** developed (again, quoting *Wikipedia*,) “...from telegraphic codes.”

“Its first commercial use was as a seven-bit teleprinter code promoted by **Bell** data services. Work on **ASCII** formally began October 6, 1960, with the first meeting of the **American Standards Association’s** (**ASA**) X3.2 subcommittee. The first edition of the standard was published in 1963, a major revision in 1967, and the most recent update in 1986. Compared to earlier telegraph codes, the proposed **Bell** code and **ASCII** were both ordered for more convenient sorting (i.e., alphabetization) of lists, and added features for devices other than teleprinters.” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ascii>).

Features for devices other than teleprinter, eh? No kidding.

But please note: the most recent update was 1986. The **Unicode** effort got underway in 1987, and work on **UTF-8** didn’t even begin until 1992 (and by the way, many industrial-grade information management systems have only recently been dragged, like a sledge on dirt, into adoption of **UTF-8**).

(an aside: look — Sorry about all the citations from *Wikipedia*. I personally have in my possession three editions of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* at home — and that’s only because my kid sister the Classics professor grabbed the Eleventh edition, so I don’t have four. Maybe I should move one set closer to this workstation so I can appear to be citing reputable resources...)

Anyway, in 1971 **Michael Hart** began what became **Project Gutenberg**, while he was a student at the **University of Illinois**. The critical moment came as **Hart** typed a copy of the **United State Declaration of Independence** into a **Xerox Sigma V** mainframe owned by the university’s Materials Research Lab.

That mainframe was on **ARPANET**, which began with four nodes (**UCLA**, **Stanford Research Institute**, **UC Santa Barbara**, and the **University of Utah’s Computer Science Department**) in 1969, and had been extended to research centers and universities as far as the east coast by 1970. In other words, this was the early Internet...

continued on page 91

So there you have it: In 1971 — the conjunction of

- creation of an electronic textual document that was not an immediate message such as a telegram, (we could make the case that the **Declaration of Independence** was, by all means, a message, but now is not the time...),
- storage of that document on a computer system in retrievable form, interconnection of that computer system with a number of others on a network stretching across a significant chunk of real estate.

This is, of course, a gross oversimplification of a highly complex series of events — tantamount to pulling a **James Burke**, saying a scrawling of digital graffiti brought down an industry or two, embarrassed a number of major educational institutions, and became the feeding trough for an entire generation of lawyers.

But this is **Antidisambiguation**, so let us be non-disingenuous.

The tectonic plates came together and began to fold quite a while ago. And yet as ever, when we hear the flapping of pigeons taking flight, we think we're privileged to witness the dawning of the Modern Age.

And the lawyers are only just getting warmed up, so I guess these are still the old days after all.

A lawyer I knew in Alaska once commented to me that there were a lot of towns in Alaska that were too small to support a lawyer, but he'd never seen any that were too small to support two lawyers...

At the very least, it is fair to say that we have not yet fully awakened to the ramifications of events that occurred nearly forty years ago. 🐼

B.O.S.S.

Basch Online Subscription Service

B.O.S.S. is like having your client service representative on your desktop!

VIEW YOUR ACCOUNT INFORMATION	SEARCH TITLE DATABASE
TITLES ORDERED	TITLES STATUS
PLACE ORDERS	PLACE A CLAIM
VIEW CLAIMS STATUS	RESPOND TO A CLAIM
PUBLISHER PAYMENT	INVOICE INFORMATION
DOWNLOAD CUSTOM REPORTS	VIEW LIST OF E-JOURNALS
ADDRESS CHANGE	ACCESS E-JOURNALS
A-Z LISTING of CONTENT	ANNUAL RENEWAL ONLINE
OFFERING PUBMED LINKOUT FEATURES	RECEIVE RENEWAL REMINDERS 90 DAYS IN ADVANCE
CREATION and STORAGE of CUSTOM MANAGEMENT REPORTS	BRANDED E-PORTAL

If you're tired of getting lost in the crowd, constantly speaking to "voicemail" and never hearing from your client services representative, move to **Basch**, where you are our **first** and **only** priority.

BASCH
Subscriptions, Inc.

Basch Subscriptions, Inc. • 10 Ferry St. • Concord, NH 03301 • (603) 229-0662
www.basch.com

Technology Left Behind — The Demise of the Print Newspaper

Column Editor: **Cris Ferguson** (Electronic Resources/Serials Librarian, James B. Duke Library, Furman University, 3300 Poinsett Hwy, Greenville, SC 29613; Phone: 864-294-2713) <cris.ferguson@furman.edu>

On December 5, 2006, **Jeremy Caplan's** "Forum: the Future of Newspapers" appeared in the online version of *TIME*. The piece shared the opinions of leaders in the news media field on the future of the print newspaper. The comments highlighted in the article acknowledged the fact that the newspaper's share of the advertising market was diminishing, but, overall, the remarks were optimistic. **John Kimball**, the Chief Marketing Officer for the **Newspaper Association of America**, stated, "This is a still an extremely healthy business, not a business facing imminent doom."

Fast forward to just a little over two years later.

The cover story of the February 5, 2009 issue of *TIME*, **Walter Isaacson's** "How to Save Your Newspaper," addresses the recent crisis in journalism. **Isaacson** states, "It is now possible to contemplate a time when some major cities will no longer have a newspaper and when magazines and network-news operations will employ no more than a handful of reporters."

This past fall and spring proved crippling, even fatal, for several major newspapers across the country. The recent casualty list is impressive (in a depressing sort of way). Last December, the **Tribune Co.**, parent to both the

Chicago Tribune and the *Los Angeles Times*, filed for bankruptcy. In January of this year, *The New York Times*, in a financial crisis, received a \$250 million bailout from Mexican telecommunications mogul **Carlos Slim Helu**. The 150-year-old *Rocky Mountain News* shut down entirely on February 27, 2009. On March 17, 2009, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* ran off the press for the last time, emerging as an entirely digital news product. The list goes on.

Most recently, *The Boston Globe* narrowly escaped closure. In early May, the **NYT Co.**, the *Globe's* parent company, threatened to close the newspaper if the paper's unions did not cut \$20,000,000 in costs. (The *Globe* fiasco was the most recent newspaper crisis at the time this column went to press).

Paul Gillin, a former editor of *Computerworld* and author of two books on media and marketing, runs the blog *Newspaper Death Watch*. **Gillin** keeps a running tally of the newspapers that have either transitioned to a primarily online presence or shut down altogether since he launched the blog in March 2007. In addition to the papers mentioned above, there are some notable names on the list, such as the *Baltimore Examiner*, *Tuscon Citizen*, and the *Ann Arbor News*, to name a few.

What Went Wrong?

These newspapers were not flashes in the pan; they were long-standing traditions and once thriving businesses. The *Seattle P-I*, aged 146 years, was the oldest business in Seattle. The *Ann Arbor News*, which will shut down on July 23, 2009, is 174 years old. So, what happened to these bastions of journalism and news media?

Isaacson, a former managing editor of *TIME*, attributes the newspaper meltdown to the fact that few consumers are paying for their access to news. "According to a **Pew Research Study**," says **Isaacson**, "a tipping point occurred last year: more people in the U.S. got their news online for free than paid for it by buying newspapers and magazines."

It isn't as simple as saying that the Internet has alleviated the need or desire for newspaper content. According to *CQ Researcher*, "In the midst of circulation declines and financial stress, newspapers' readership may be higher than ever because of the popularity of their Websites and the larger number of other sites that link to newspaper-produced content."

The problem is that fewer people are *paying* for their news. News organizations are giving away their content on their Websites for free, and

continued on page 92