

February 2009

## Pelikan's Antidisambiguation--Emerging Technologies

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### Recommended Citation

Pelikan, Michael (2009) "Pelikan's Antidisambiguation--Emerging Technologies," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 21: Iss. 1, Article 4.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2487>

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## Pelikan's Antidisambiguation — Emerging Technologies

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

Hello — This column's name stems from the fact that I stand firmly, as a matter of principle, against "*disambiguation*." If *disambiguation* is a word, then there must be a verb somewhere (in the infinitive), "*to ambiguate*." If that is true, then I missed something somewhere. If there is no such verb, then why must we hear of it? At any event, I'm against it, and therefore, my position is one of *Antidisambiguation*.



This column will discuss **emerging technologies**. Amidst the marketing hype, the techno-babble, and the outrageous and continuing generation of *terms-nouvelle*, there are sometimes deep currents at work: trends that we overlook at our peril.

### Column #1 — "Sell 'em the Razor, Then sell 'em the Blades, too!"

Ever-present on **Amazon's** home page, but not-so-commonly-actually-seen, **Amazon's Kindle** has crept into a moment of prominence in the mainstream attention span lately. The reason? **Amazon** has announced the **Kindle 2**.

In the meantime, **Sony** introduced a new

version of their **Reader** quite recently (the **PRS-700**), appearing to respond to user feedback through the inclusion of a backlighting system for the now touch-sensitive screen.

The original **Kindle** and **Sony's PRS-505** (PRS stands for "Portable Reader System"), have been in general circulation for well over a year. Yet even now, to be caught actually using one is to invite comment or questions such as, "Is that one of those eBook readers?" (No, it's a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich.) How do you like it?" (I love it. In fact, I was reading on it when you interrupted me...)

Working in **Penn State's Emerging Technologies Group**, I have spent quite a bit of time with both the **Kindle** and the **Sony Reader**. While that both **Amazon** and **Sony** seem to be concentrating on the individual user, widespread personal adoption may present us with organizational or institutional possibilities. Gazing into the crystal ball, what might we see for institutional and library support and services? There's much to discuss here. In this first column I'll take a look at the po-

sitioning going on as **Amazon** and **Sony** vie for the personal market. Next time, I'll go deeper into how such devices, and others, *and the content they all feed on*, might fit into our existing and emerging institutional information infrastructures.

A genuine old-fashioned book-loving book lover, I have found both the **Kindle** and the **Sony Reader** to be absolutely wonderful. Most remarkable is the degree of verisimilitude they both achieve — you quickly forget the device itself, thanks in large part to the component they have in common: the amazing **electrophoretic** display from **E Ink Corporation**.

The **Sony Reader** lacks the wireless delivery of content (via **Sprint's** cellular network) that lies at the center of the **Kindle's** feature set. You have to connect the **Sony Reader** to a computer to move content onto it.

The real question is this: **why are these devices still rare enough to attract comment when seen in public?**

Both **Amazon** and **Sony**, it appears to me, have chosen to target their marketing efforts for eBook readers at the typical member of the "Brie and Chablis" crowd. Who is this person? He or she is an affluent, frequently traveling professional, a book-lover who listens to **NPR**,

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Take a closer look at....

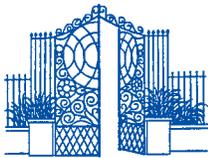
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### Pelikan's Antidisambiguation

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supports PBS, attends Patron-only receptions at the Met, is thinking of trading the Lexus for a Prius, and who believes that plunking down three to four hundred dollars for an eBook reader is a way to help fight global warming, "Just think of the trees we're saving!"

Moreover, Sony and Amazon are repeating an age-old, long-overthrown, ultimately-indefensible approach to attaining market share: they strive to link the content to the device.

Amazon really wants you to buy content for the Kindle through Amazon — indeed, they make it ridiculously easy to buy books and news subscriptions — all you need is the Amazon account. Yes, they also permit you to tether the Kindle to your computer and pull some files over, but they do nothing to encourage you to do so. They include no file format conversion utilities. Indeed, to transfer a pdf file to your Kindle, Amazon wants you to email it as an attachment to your personal Kindle account. Amazon's Kindle service performs a file conversion, then transfers the file (no longer a pdf) to your Kindle over the Sprint cellular connection.

Maybe (probably) I'm paranoid, but given how Amazon minutely analyzes your product searches and then continually offers you what it expects you to want, I would like explicit affirmation that if I send, for example, a schedule for upcoming circus dates in State College to my Kindle, Amazon's not going to start offering me circus books, movies, music, t-shirts, lunch boxes, etc, whenever I visit their site! I

don't like people reading over my shoulder...

Sony requires you to hook up to a computer to load content, but in exchange for this small inconvenience, they're vastly more laissez-faire on the matter of (a) pricing for the content in the Sony Store and (b) co-existing with third-party tools for converting and loading a wide variety of file formats onto the Reader. Sony's "personal eBook library" software includes some file conversion utilities, and the open source community has embraced the Sony Reader with an extensive array of excellent format conversion solutions, none of which require you to email content to yourself through a third party.

Take a look at *calibre*, a remarkable open source software package found at <http://calibre.kovidgoyal.net/>.

In many years of observing the trajectories of open source efforts, I must say it's rare to see a package develop, accumulate useful features, and continue to mature at the speed which *calibre* seems to be sustaining. For its seamless ingestion of pdf files alone, *calibre* becomes a closing argument for buying the Sony Reader. I've got a shelf load of users manuals for myriad products neatly converted from pdf, and accessible on the Reader.

Also included with *calibre* are dozens of "recipes" that pull RSS feeds from an ever-broadening range of sources (Ars Technica, the Associated Press, Barron's, ESPN, The Guardian, Harper's Magazine, Jerusalem Post, the New Yorker, and on and on). Among the list of RSS sources is Google Reader, meaning that if you're using Google Reader to aggregate your RSS feeds, you can use *calibre*

to download the latest from Google Reader onto your Sony Reader.

So — there's one of the target groups Amazon and Sony are missing: the geeks. Like me.

But here's another: a much larger and potentially vastly more enriching group. We had a pilot project here at Penn State last semester. A freshman Honors English class used the Sony Reader for all their class reading material for the course. I spoke with Dr. Diana Gruendler to gather her sense of the students' impressions from the experiment.

Dr. Gruendler is the sort of teacher who has her students reading books, "...two chapters out of this one at the same time as three out of another..." She says her students "loved the size" of the Sony Reader, because they didn't have to bring their backpacks to class.

Gruendler also said the Reader facilitated reading, "You scan when you read off a computer screen. When they were on the Reader they were engaged with the book!" She said students reported they would read more in a single sitting, because of that engagement, along with the absence of physical clues as to how much you've read.

As for the technical hurdles of converting and loading content onto the Reader, Gruendler said it was a non-issue. She assigned her students to download, in pdf format, the complete platforms of the Republican and Democratic Parties, and to bring them to class on their Sony Readers by the next day: 100% of her students did so successfully. She said that if she had asked them simply to download the pdf files and read them on their laptops, they likely wouldn't have read them — or if they had, would probably have printed them out first.

This brings us to the next step — and it should be an obvious one: course packs. Why not have the campus centers that build the course packs, do the copyright clearance, etc, simply take the additional step of producing pdf versions of the course packs? Gruendler said the students themselves started speculating how quickly they'd recoup their investment in a Reader if they could load their course packs onto it at even a slight savings off the printed price.

And next — Textbooks! Yes — why not textbooks too?

If Amazon wants the Kindle to become the iPod of eBooks, they need to price it much lower, target it at the college student market, get into cahoots with the textbook publishers, and offer textbooks on the Kindle at, say 10% to 15% below the printed price. Amazon and the publishers would more than make up in volume what they lose in the markdown. They'd also breed an ever-growing loyal market as those students went on to become wage-earning consumers.

The only persons who'd come out worse would be the chiropractors.

And finally, both Amazon and Sony seem to be concentrating on the individual user. Gazing into the crystal ball, what might we see for institutional library support and services? We'll take a look at that in the next column. 🍷