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## An Alphabetical Fable -- Article and Book Meet the Google

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# An Alphabetical Fable — Article and Book Meet the Google

**Wherein an Apprehensive Article** (doubtless from a scholarly journal) **and a Rather Bolder Book** (of the sort that may be monetizing your click stream any day now) **Discuss Current Affairs...**

by **Margaret Landesman** (Head, Collection Development, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah; Phone: 801-581-7741) <margaret.landesman@utah.edu>

## Chapter One: Before they Met the Google

**Article** and **Book** had lived together for a very long time. Occasional visits from a relative, perhaps one of the Indexes, enlivened their days, but never penetrated deeply their peaceful existence. [Though — then as now — it was far better to have a relative, even an Index, than to have no visitors at all.]

Book did go out [infrequently] — as did Article on occasion — but on the whole they led quiet lives. Their parents had long ago relinquished them to their current landlord, the **Catalog**, which itself was part of a larger conglomerate, the Library.

The Library took good care of them — furnishing heat, light, and shelf space while making few demands — the occasional excursion to be Reclassified or perhaps, if quite worn out, to the Bindery.

There was talk of a new landlord, called Storage — and of some sort of cloning procedure, **Digitization**, which would reduce them to a shadow of themselves — but a very portable and appealing sort of shadow — and it sounded painless. They felt slightly nervous about what happened after Digitization — but...

It had to do with things **Electronic** — E-books, E-journals — E didn't loom large in their world — and they kind of hoped E would go away.

It happened, though, as it sometimes does, that it didn't.

All of a sudden, everybody who was anybody was **Full Text**. And anybody who wasn't somebody was nobody in a whole new way. This was puzzling, since they had always supposed their text to be full from the start.

They knew they weren't often read, but they comforted themselves that no one could say for sure. Now though, they knew. No one read them. No one ever would. [Which didn't mean they would sink to advertising.]

Article, feeling forlorn and a bit whiney, complained, "You're a Book. People cite you and pretend they've read you. You have no idea how embarrassing it is to be an Article with no Impact Factor to speak of."

Looming over them all was the **Google**. No one quite knew what sort of an entity a Google might be. It had a motto, "Don't Be Evil," that sounded encouraging.

After that, it was sort of hard to pin down. The Publisher and Vendor relations weren't

at all happy about the Google. And it was rumored Google had relatives [not blood ones, more like imitators] with names like Yahoo and MSN who didn't have mottos like Google's.

But then an invitation came:

*Come and meet the Google.  
The Google will take you miles  
and miles and all for free.*

Uncle Press was very much alarmed. "Who is this Google?"

"You can come too," Book pointed out. "You're invited."

"No, better to wait — we think we'll wait."

## Chapter Two: Meeting the Google

Meeting the **Google** is a very brief business. Goes by so fast you hardly notice it. But something happens in here and it starts with **H**. [There are those who think what happens is **horrid** and others who think it's **helpful**.]

## Chapter Three: How after you've been Googled, you will fit in an iPod

"An iPod?" asked Article.

"Of course," said Book. "People listen to books as they drive cars or walk on their tread-mills. They put their lecture notes or the latest Harry Potter — whatever — on the iPod."

"But how do you get from the Google to the iPod?"

"Maybe with Google maps? It might be best not to ask, not unless you're in the Public Domain anyway."

"The world will never be the same," lamented Article.

"Probably not," replied Book.

"Our forebears didn't have to put up with this sort of thing."

## Chapter Four: The Way We Never Were

"Actually," Book said, "They did. Think how the papyri felt, with their elegance and lovely texture, when readers started preferring stuff made from worn out clothes and rags. Movable type moved in; colophons left. These self-promoting Title Pages and book jackets arrived. And numbers on every page — as if a page is so unimportant it can just be categorized as 23 or 68."

What do we do with **J** and **K**?

This is a fable — not some peer-reviewed sort of thing. Call them **Junk**.

## Chapter Five: Hanging on to the Long Tail by your Metadata

"Think of it like this" Book went on. Remember the brontosaurus — dragging its **Long Tail**? Turns out it wasn't like that. They waved those tails in the air like banners sailing along behind."

"Now it is difficult to think of ourselves as inhabiting a tail — of any sort. But, if you have to be part of a tail — a really **LONG** tail is not so bad. IF you hang on tightly with your **Metadata**."

"What's Metadata?" asked Article.

"They used to call it cataloging."

"Oh."

"Your metadata gets stuffed into the tail along with you, so that when the Google is crawling the tail, it makes a copy of all your words — gobbles them up. And then when people Google any of your words, they find you."

"Google crawls? And gobbles?" Article is by now definitely apprehensive.

"Well, yes," replied Book. "Anyway, it means that when people are looking for something and they type some of your words in, they find you — and maybe they never knew about you before. Now that they know about you, they can come looking for you and, who knows, maybe you will turn out to have been a seminal article."

## Chapter Six: Life in the Long Tail

"How will they know my address?" worried Article.

"Tails are like any real estate — Location, Location, and Location. Some people think moving to an Open Access neighborhood means more readers will find you."

"But their crime rate is high — they're not protected by Peer Review."

"Don't be silly — **NAR** moved and took her peer review with her, early on in the first wiggle of the first wave of the long tail."

"NAR?"

"Nucleic Acids Research. Remember? From O.U.P. — nicknamed NAR."

## Chapter Seven: NAR Moves to an Open Access Neighborhood and Takes Peer Q. Review Along

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“Open Access,” lectured Book, “just means the universities or whoever hatched the articles pays the publication costs up front, instead of laundering the money through publishers and the campus library. Much more efficient.”

“Isn’t that vanity publishing?”

“Not if you take **Peer Q. Review** along.”

“I don’t remember Peer having a Q.?”

“He added it —stands for **Quantum Dot.**”

### Chapter Eight: Social Networking [to get your Tags into the Ubiquitous Zoosphere where they will be Found, Even in a Quantum Dot]

“Peer is into **Social Networking** — hangs out on MySpace and Second Life,” Book went on. “He heard Quantum Dots would be the Next Big Thing, so he added the Q. Thought he might attract more Tags that way.”

“What,” enquired Article, “are Quantum Dots? Tags?”

“Tags to float in the tag clouds. I’ll explain about the QDs later, but there is this new thing called ‘tagging’.”

“**Tagging** isn’t new — we’ve had them since kindergarten — yours come from the

Library of Congress and live in big red books — and mine are in the Indexes — I suppose they’re in the computer now?”

“Yes, but these new tags aren’t decided between you and the librarians. Anybody can tag you with any word they want. — and everybody else can see them and find you too — if they use the same words.”

“Isn’t that dangerous? What if they don’t like me? Won’t everyone know it?”

“Yes.”

“I see.” said a resigned Article. “So what happens next?”

“Everything will get smaller and faster and smaller and faster — and the Tail will get longer and longer and thinner and thinner till you can hardly see it, but it will float like a balloon up into the **Zoosphere**. (excuse me, but you need to go to the end of the line.) Eventually, the whole long tail with all of us hanging on by our metadata will get so small it can curl up and fit itself into a Quantum Dot.”

“With the brontosaurus? Or without?”

“I’m not sure about the brontosaurus, but the tail definitely fits. And you can put the whole thing on a Quantum Dot printed on the inside of a paperback or on a business card or wherever. Information will be **Ubiquitous** — it’s called *Ambient Findability* — try googling that — you might even find it in the library catalog.”

What do we do with V?

This is a **VERY** silly story. That’s because

librarians have no training in alphabetical fables and they are having a hard time adapting to this new world and just walk about mumbling over and over ‘People don’t like to read books on a screen.’

### Chapter Nine: The Final Word

“It’s your **Words** that make you — they’re the only thing that counts — if more people read you, why do you care whether it’s Times Roman 14 on vellum or stored in a Quantum Dot?”

“Words are the end of the story. The rest is just footnotes.”

#### Footnotes:

**X** — is for a crossroads. Perhaps books and articles are at a crossroads — where they may go in new directions?

**Y** — If you have to ask what Y stands for, you are too out of it to be reading this fable. (Y stands for **YouTube.**)

**Z** — Though not quite the problem **Q** presents for alphabetical tales, **Z** is nonetheless best relegated to a footnote. Only somehow it snuck in above out of order.

Colleagues have enquired as to why I wrote this story. I wrote it because my children had lovely little alphabetical tales called Ant and Bee when they were little. And because I have a collection of alphabet books. Now that I am fully cognizant of just how many letters there are in the alphabet, I will not be writing another. 🐘

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## The Library Marketplace

Column Editor: **John D. Riley** (National Sales Director for Eastern Book Company, author of “*Else Fine: Little Tales of Horror from Libraries and Bookshops*” and “*The Parrot’s Tale and Other Stories*” and co-owner of Gabriel Books) <jdriley@comcast.net>



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### Now Starring on Center Stage in the Library: The Book!!

At first glance there is a book renaissance going on. More books than ever are getting published and sold, self publishing has surpassed commercial publishing output, audio books are setting new sales records, print on demand (POD) is opening up new markets for obscure titles, out of print sites have given us access to just about any o.p. book we might want, live readings are bringing new life to poetry, book arts are hot (both artists’ books and binding crafts). So why the malaise in the book world?

I first noticed the tide turning when sessions at the **Charleston Conference** started addressing topics such as, “Wither the Book?” and “...Books (Remember Them?)” Books themselves were no longer the focus of discussion, replaced instead by licensing issues and other electronic product quandaries. In the face of an electronic information juggernaut **Jack Waldorf**, **Richard Abel** and **Matthew J. Bruccoli** continue to keep books and their value foremost in their presentations. **Larry Portzline** and his

“**Bookstore Tourism,**” **Nicholas Basbanes**, **Katina Strauch**, and the indomitable **Nancy Pearl** are also great promoters of the book. Yet the actual topic of books in the academic library no longer holds center stage, perhaps rightfully so. There has been a sea of change in research tools in academic libraries with electronic products swiftly replacing books as the main source of current information. Book budgets at university libraries have been turned upside down with electronic products replacing books and print journals as the preferred source of information. Where books once made up 60% of the library budget, they are now closer to 30% and tumbling.

In this new environment we find the scholarly monograph on life support and university presses looking for ways to stay relevant. Print on demand may breathe new life into scholarly backlists, but sales still hover in the hundreds for new titles. Paperback editions once held the promise of getting those titles into **Borders** and **Barnes & Noble**, but that was a mirage, as

those two dominant bookstores (the country’s biggest chain sellers) cut back on scholarly books. Now university presses are looking to eBooks for a revival under pressure from libraries that have run out of space and are doing more distance teaching.

As the owner (along with my wife **Patty** of **Gabriel Books** in Northampton, Massachusetts) the news of the fading place of books in the cultural landscape is a frequent topic of discussion with other booksellers. Bookstore closings are an almost weekly occurrence: **Micawber’s**, **Wordsworth’s**, **Kepler’s**, **The Ruminator**, **Avenue Victor Hugo**, **Cody’s**, etc, etc. Sometimes it seems that the more venerable a bookshop the more at risk it is of closing. Their deep back lists and the chances they take stocking quirky new books just don’t pay off anymore.

Online book sites are replacing brick and mortar bookstores while electronic products are replacing books in libraries. Bookstores and libraries appear to be in the same boat, rushing

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