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Pelikan's Antidisambiguation -- On the Legitimization of "Mobile"

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Pelikan's Antidisambiguation — On the Legitimization of "Mobile"

Column Editor: **Michael P. Pelikan** (Penn State) <mpp10@psu.edu>

No doubt about it, these are heady times! Lo, we have lived to see the days in which eBook readers, and now, small-form factor tablet computers, have been "legitimized."

So this summer, as we all head off to our many and various professional conferences of choice, we will find compelling evidence of this legitimacy in at least three ways.

1. We will see the devices everywhere, indeed, competing devices, some now mainstream, some in the process of adoption, and some flourished with the practiced nonchalance of the first adopters of the Newest Things.
2. We will see academic and professional presentations on conference programs breathlessly tackling the challenges of providing services to, or the opportunities to address the challenges of, or best of all, the pedagogical implications of (enter device type here).
3. We will be inundated on the vendors' display floor at the conferences by a dazzling display of wares, hard and soft, from vendors as well-known as your least-favorite relatives-by-marriage, some as new and trustworthy as a teenaged suitor.

The message delivered, across the board, will be "The Long-Awaited Future has Arrived! Don't get Left Behind! Better Buy Now!"

So Deans, Department Heads, and Supervisors will arrive home ready to demand answers to the question, "What are we doing about (enter device type here)?"

And junior members, aspirants, and supplicants will arrive home ready to ask the Dickensian question, "Please, Sir (or Madam), may I do something about (enter device type here)?"

And all because **Amazon** legitimized eBooks and **Apple** legitimized tablets!

Dear readers (both of you!), this is nothing so much as a combination of saying that a leading luggage company legitimized air travel, and that the Yellow Pages legitimized the telephone.

Let's see — how far back should we go? Well, the Babylonians impressed cuneiform figures into clay tablets, some of which, no doubt, were of convenient size. But perhaps that's too much of a stretch, even for Antidisambiguation! We must treat the real questions at hand with The Gravitas They Deserve.

All of these devices center, fundamentally, on the portability of information, and in that sense, differ in no great degree from their more technologically primitive forebears, the paperback book and the clipboard. The World Wide Web was created in 1994 and then just sat there, despite endless home page redesigns. To this day, many Web sites offering access to essential services are still entirely weighed down with large bodies of text containing tiny links amidst huge images; all mired down in fixed-width pages, devoid of the readily-available means to discover what sort of browser is trying to access them, and then adapting flexibly to accommodate the presentation — in other words, a whole lot of Websites are essentially useless for mobile devices. Warnings about the strategic need to de-couple content from presentation stretch back into the 1990s. Many organizations are struggling only now to climb on board the mobility bandwagon — and climbing onto a moving passenger train ain't easy!

Meanwhile, the customers left long ago. As soon as we had computers the size of sewing machines, and at the same time, we already had

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large amounts of information in buildings full of printed documents and sitting on computers large enough to require their own buildings, the seeds of everything we've seen since were sewn.

The eBook was invented in 1971 when **Michael Hart** transcribed the Declaration of Independence into the **Xerox Sigma V** mainframe at the **University of Illinois**, thus initiating **Project Gutenberg**.

In 1983, **Tandy** brought out the **TRS-80 Model 100**, a small portable computer (about the size of a standard three-ring binder) with an eight-line display, up to 24 kilobytes of non-volatile storage, and capable of operating for up to twenty hours on four AA batteries. It included built-in applications in read-only memory including a text editor, an address book, and a to-do list. It also sported a terminal program and a built-in 300 baud modem, so connectivity to the mainframe back at the office was as close as the nearest phone line. This three-pound device, as well as its significance, was immediately grasped, nay, seized, by folks who needed to author article-length documents on-the-go (including this correspondent). Many who used and loved the **Model 100** will tell you that this was the device that opened their eyes to the radical possibilities represented by the dawning digital era. By the way, the software on the **Model 100** was from a company called **Microsoft**, and that software's development (including no small portion of the actual code) was personally overseen by that company's brilliant young co-founder, **Bill Gates**, of whom we were to hear more at a later time. Please note the apps that came with the device. Note also that it was an instant-on

device — no waiting for the thing to boot up. Again, the year was 1983.

So here, front and center, was the idea that a computer could be put to a personal and or white-collar purpose — something other than calculating the ballistic trajectory of artillery shells — wherever one happened to be, away from AC power, on the fly, with results to be shared back later. This was the paradigm-shifting device. Yet no one speaks much anymore of this device, although it is remembered fondly and sometimes still taken off the shelf and started up for old time's sake. Mine still works.

Today, what **Amazon** and **Apple** both want more than anything else, of course, is to achieve the accomplishment of actually naming an entire class of devices. They ache to have **Kindle** or **iPad** become the same as **Kleenex**. This is actually very difficult to accomplish, and quite rare. You can buy a **Ford**, but no one will comment, "You bought a **Ford** instead of a **Chevy**?" How are you going to get to work?" For that matter, no one will say, "I'm going to the bookstore to buy a **Harper and Row**." One might say, "I'm going to buy a *New York Times*," but everyone will understand that this refers to a particular publication.

The plain fact is that both eBook readers and small tablet computing devices haven't finished converging yet — not to the point at which we can really nail down the categories the way the manufacturers want.

The recent study at the **University of Washington** points directly to the limitations standing in the way of unequivocal adoption of the **Kindle DX** as a textbook replacement. The results speak of limitations in note-taking capabilities, place-finding, the facile handling of illustrations, charts, tables, graphs, and more. I commend the study to your attention. **Google** something like "**University of Washington Kindle DX Study**"

— that should get you close. Ah! See! There it is again! We all recognize "**Google**" as a verb. Not easy to achieve...

To become truly useful, eBook readers need to become at least a little more tablet-like. They've already got a lot of what they need on board. The display is a chief dividing line and sticking point, however. The electrophoretic display technology behind the **Kindle**, the **Sony Reader**, the monochrome **Nook**, etc., is both a chief feature and a chief limitation. It's a beautiful display for reading, for the most part, but the lack of color, and more importantly, the slow refresh rate, limit its usefulness as a display for a more general purpose device. On the other hand, the capacitive LED display such as on tablets like the **Motorola Xoom**, the **Asus Eee Pad Transformer**, and yes, the **iPad**, and by the way, on the **Nook Color** (which is sold as an eBook reader), offers high resolution, rich color, and a refresh rate sufficient to handle the display of video. This comes at the cost, of course, of battery life, and as a result of that, to some extent, weight — the weight of the larger battery required to keep the thing running. WIFI access costs in power as well. Additionally, tablets have larger storage and operating memory requirements. It's a heftier set of requirements, resulting in a heftier device: almost too much heft for anything other than two-handed reading or lap-resting, much as with a hardback edition rather than a paperback.

I have to go back and call out the **Nook Color** device. I bought one for my wife (one way to sneak it into the house...) and she loves it. The display is drop-dead gorgeous, it works well for reading in bed whilst your partner saws logs — no little bitty light required! What's more, the **Nook Color** has a functional browser, and **Barnes & Noble** is in the process of opening up many capabilities that are inherent in the platform but have been dozing beneath the surface. The hacker community knew about this from the start, and **B&N** did essentially nothing to discourage them. The secret is this: the **Nook Color** is essentially an **Android Tablet**. Its limitations as a functional tablet are largely surmountable through software. It doesn't have the dual-core processor of the **Motorola Xoom** or the **Asus Eee Pad Transformer**, but it costs \$250.

And what about the **Asus Transformer**? Logically, the **Eee Pad Transformer** seems like a novel and possibly elegant solution (except, perhaps, for its extraordinarily inelegant name) to those wishing for a flexible hybrid approach to the challenges of a multipurpose device. The only thing perhaps worth mentioning is that the keyboard you get is the keyboard you have — and you probably end up carrying it with you even when you don't end up using it, just in case you might need it. The "tap tap tap" on-display keyboards on the other tablets are really quite functional. The trace-from-letter-to-letter-with-your-fingertip approach works well for small text entry: search strings and the like. And please, please do not disregard Voice Input. It is not only coming, it is here: you need only look. It is maturing very, very rapidly, and it, in combination with Text-to-Speech, will result in an even larger paradigm switch than the emergence of eBook readers and small-form tablets have so far achieved, combined. By far.

I've more than used up my allotted space for the moment. Please remember — We like to think we are living at the Dawning of the Future Age, but we're actually living in the Old Days. More on all of this next time... 🐼