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Pelikan's Antidisambiguation: Of Glass, Cloud Access, Possession, Knowledge, and Privacy

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Pelikan's Antidisambiguation — “Of Glass, Cloud, Access, Possession, Knowledge, and Privacy...”

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

“Change. n. 1 the Action of changing. > an instance of becoming different.” So says the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. A “rate of change” connotes acceleration. Acceleration is the rate of change of velocity over time.

All of which is to preface this sentiment: Change isn't slowing down. Yesterday's breakthroughs are plowed under at an astonishing rate — you'd think I'd be used to it by now. Or perhaps, I've been lulled by the sense that I embrace change, am rarely surprised by it, and therefore have somehow become master of my own reactions to it.

And yet, I've not reached the limits of my ability to be surprised — blind-sided, even — by my own habitual mental models of what's happening out there in the world — outside my complacent sense of understanding.

Fortunately, most such instances are of genuinely trivial importance in a world in which birth and death are the truly inescapable mileposts of change.

My Dad used to say most folks seek not the Fountain of Youth, but rather the Fountain of Eternal Adolescence. What are our attractions, flirtations, restlessness, and cravings for change with technology other than the echoes of the throes of youthful discovery of the mysteries of the hive?

Amidst the recent celebrations, lamentations, and exhortations surrounding the seemingly sudden appearance on the landscape of **Google Glass**, I've been self-satisfied and reassured in the realization that while these devices represent a technological breakthrough, they do not truly bring in anything deeply NEW, rather simply a new form factor for capabilities we've had for some time.

I've reflected in this column before how, today, the Internet is our encyclopedia, and how, when I was a kid, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* was, in effect, my Internet. A directed search, browsing, following cross references and free associations that

arose whilst reading — all these activities, these “inquiry models” carried over from the physical format to the electronically accessed format easily and seamlessly.

The extent to which newer forms of access to remote information have become routine, natural habits seems, in hindsight, surprising. Now it feels strange not to have immediate access at the hip to the wide range of information available online. I remember a very early version of a *Concise Encyclopedia* that fit on an SD card to be read on a Palm PDA. The articles were paragraph length, and their number was limited, but it was a tantalizing glimpse of what was to come.

It all moved to what we now call the Cloud, before it was called the Cloud. The essential operational characteristic is access, not possession. Of course, the libraries were way out in front on this, and wrestled with the conceptual and perceptual dissonance resulting from buying something they would not possess “physically.” **ProQuest** was the Cloud long before the Cloud, although I guess it's well to remember the developmental path

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such resources followed. We went from paper-based indexes and abstracts to electronic versions delivered physically on Compact Disc. From there, it wasn't too great a leap to serve out access to the indexes, entries, and accompanying abstracts over the fledgling Internet. We did this to retrieve the citation, and the abstract served to separate wheat from chaff in a result set.

To go from that condition to one in which searching was possible across multiple sources, and could result in full-text retrieval, oh my, that was new! Librarians wondered about permanence of access, and may well still!

Creeping at the periphery of this landscape were nascent efforts dividing along facets of these issues. Project Gutenberg placed its holdings online. You could download the files, thereby "possessing" them. Napster came and went, and neither quietly. Questions of licensure and copyright came to the fore, and possession. Clever scrofflaws devised robotic means to achieve systematic download and, thereby, possession. Meanwhile, the humble origins of today's streaming services began to emerge. In these, there was no question of possession, only of access — you got to witness the thing as it went by but never "held it."

As Web and Search began to predominate the way sessions on the Internet were initiated (as opposed to "home pages," that is, YOUR home page, where you kept links, predating

bookmarks, to things you frequently accessed), it began to dawn on folks that the knowledge base that was being "crowd-sourced" on the Web might be "good enough" for many purposes — and at any rate, might well continue to iterate toward improvement. We arrived at Google as Dictionary, Google as Atlas, and of course, Google as Immediate Access Point for what would have been encyclopedia look-ups.

As well, special-purpose reference sources emerged to serve intensive vertical markets (IMDB comes to mind).

Next we threw ourselves into the hands of the providers of cellular radio access to the Internet, providing us with all of these capabilities in miraculous, hand-held devices.

So it should not be at all surprising that we have arrived at the point where we are now. There is an expectation of immediate, at-hand access to almost anything, from wherever you are. We're moving personal storage onto the Cloud: "My Stuff," stored somewhere, we don't really know or care where, just so long as we can get it when we want it. Amazon has created a brilliant bit of value added to the purchase of an MP3 file or an eBook — buy it, and you can download it, AND, at no additional charge, you can keep a copy of it in the Amazon Cloud to save you the trouble of copying "your" file to all the devices from which you might wish to access it. They're literally letting us have our cake and eat it too.

So by far the largest share of the horsepower, the interconnection, the sheer magnitude, is on the back end systems! They appear to persist, even as we take up and discard access

devices like fashion jewelry. Have you ever noticed all the mirrors in a cell phone store? Do you think they're there to make the place seem bigger? No — the next time you stop in, notice folks checking out in the mirror how they look with a phone they're considering for purchase.

Did I say purchase? Is that what we do when we lock ourselves into a two-year contract to bring the cost of a device down to a "reasonable" level? It feels more like a lease at best. Sure, you can sell the phone after deactivating it, and there is a secondary market for such things, but many folks give that no thought. They have eyes only for the new device they crave, and think only in terms of the delta or change in the monthly fee they'll pay to gain access to the shiny gizmo and all the wonders to which it provides access.

Will we ever stop paying? I'm increasingly doubtful. I have several very fine shortwave radios at home. Some of them bore an initial cost approaching that of a high-end laptop computer (I guess what's now termed an "ultrabook," not your average \$400 or \$500 plastic laptop). It seemed a stretch, a dubious value perhaps, to plunk down that kind of change for a radio back when I made those purchases. But today, those radios still work as new, and with a simple 68-foot wire in my back yard, I receive programming each and every day from all over the globe. I listen to the evening news from Radio Australia almost every morning. And yes, I realize I could listen to the same audio streamed to my phone via Internet fed over cellular. But dagnabit, if you can stop it at a national border, it ain't broadcasting!

My back yard is no different than yours. You already have radio waves from all over the planet washing over your fence, sweeping through your home like the Northern Lights. No cookies. No Tracking. No Web History.

So, just as telegraph was the first email, radio was the first streaming. We've overhauled the mechanics of access, but reception is reception. As for interaction, we've had that at least since Gopher, if not Usenet.

So what's new in the device called the Google Glass? I suppose one thing is how it has served to focus folks' attention on the possibilities of recording your life. Have you encountered the term "Sousveillance"? It's the functional opposite of "Surveillance," and it is an unapologetic, decidedly "in your face" idea. There's really no new law to be made here — perhaps. One already has little right to expect privacy in public. What's more, we regularly sign away right-to-privacy with a single click-through on a Terms of Service agreement.

Let me close out by suggesting a book. At Cornell University's Institute for Computer Policy and Law this past summer, we heard a keynote address by attorney and author Lori Andrews. She's written a marvelous book entitled, *I Know Who You Are And I Saw What You Did — Social Networks and the Death of Privacy*. She points out that by population, Facebook is the third largest nation on Earth, and that its Terms of Service is its Constitution. Highly recommended. You can buy it online. I'm sure no one will tell... 🍌