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Pelikan's Antidisambiguation: The End of the Wax Cylinder as We Know It

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Pelikan's Antidisambiguation — "The End of the Wax Cylinder as We Know It..."

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

At the time of this writing, technology news sites, those concerned with literature and publishing (not necessarily the same thing, about which, more later...), and the various industry-centric and literary-focused neighborhoods of the blogosphere are inundated with a flood of digital ink, pouring out into the crater seemingly created by the court case involving **Apple**, some prominent publishers, and their response to the ascendancy of **Amazon**.

Initial reactions have been extremely "peaky," shot out like spikes, like blow gun darts dipped in curare.

A July 11th posting by **Marcus Wohlson** on *Wired's* Website was entitled, "Apple's Court Loss Could End the Book as We Know It." <http://www.wired.com/business/2013/07/apple-amazon-book-prices/>

It made pivotal reference to another posting, this by **Alex Shepard of Melville House**, entitled, "Monopoly Achieved: an invincible **Amazon** begins raising prices." <http://www.mhpbooks.com/monopoly-acheived-an-invincible-amazon-begins-raising-prices/>

Then **David Carr** of the *New York Times* weighed in with "Why **Barnes and Noble** is

Good for **Amazon**".... http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/15/business/media/why-barnes-noble-is-good-for-amazon.html?ref=books&_r=1&

Followed by **Boris Kachka**, also in the *Times*, with "Book Publishing's Big Gamble." http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/10/opinion/book-publishings-big-gamble.html?ref=books&_r=1&

I'm writing this very carefully. For one thing, by the time these words reach print, things may have evolved, or died down. For another, I can't know the precise landscape that will have emerged by that time: these words must be written in ignorance of that.

What I *can* try to do, however, is to step back from the edgy precipices that seem to have opened up before the feet of many of these commentators, and try to offer a measured reflection on what happens in content industries as they evolve. As ever, we can learn from historical patterns.

Been to a record store lately? What has the impact been of the "End of the 45 RPM Single as We Know It"? Well. What about the wax cylinder?

When **Edison** (whom most would agree was something of a visionary) sang "Mary had a little lamb" into his new invention, (presumably after having entered into a royalty agreement with the copyright holder) he did not foresee the impact Radio, let alone the Internet, would have on the consumption of audio content. His ultimate interest at the time was to create a wholly new manufacturing industry centered on the creation and distribution of audio content on patented and exclusively controlled media: those wax cylinders.

Please note: there was already such a thing as music — he didn't invent that. There was musical notation. Music was primarily distributed on paper, in the form of published sheet music. There was a lively marketplace in which folks looked forward to the latest hot tunes, to take home and play on their pianos. There was even a glorious off-shoot to the side: the rise of the player piano, permitting persons with no musical ability whatsoever to enjoy published music if they had the financial resources to purchase the

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equipment. But again: the music existed, and did so independently of the means of capture, distribution, and consumption.

It is all well and good that **Edison** profited from his initial invention of a method to produce a mechanical recording of audio. He deserved to be rewarded for developing that invention further, moving from tin foil to wax cylinders, recognizing that some degree of physical durability in the medium was a prerequisite to commercializing the infant recorded music industry. But **Edison** did not have an inalienable right to profit from that particular form of music reproduction forever, nor could he prevent the subsequent development of alternative means of capture, manufacturing, distribution, and consumption of recorded content that might lead to an erosion in the sales of music captured in his medium.

The advent of electrical amplification, of electrically-driven recording, and the commercial viability of a process for producing a master recording on disc from which any number of copies (discs — flat — records — “as We Knew Them”) could be pressed, paved the way for a lively consumer market for music reproduction equipment employing these breakthroughs. There was a natural symbiosis between the record industry and the infant broadcasting industry, in which new content could be introduced to the market via broadcast, then sold to the consumer on disc.

What does “quality” mean in a recording? Certainly, one would wish for a high-quality

performance by an artist possessing a thorough command of the material. “Quality” might also refer to the technical accuracy, the fidelity, associated with the recording and reproduction, as well as the competency of the professionals involved in that production. Finally, “quality” can refer to the manufactured artifact produced and sold to the consumer: is it a high-quality pressing? Does the material employed ensure faithful reproduction over a sufficiently long service life of the artifact itself? How long is that?

A suggestion: go to the *Wikipedia* article entitled “**Enrico Caruso**.” Near the bottom, in a section labeled “Media,” you can click on links embedded in the article to hear, for example, **Caruso** singing *Una furtive lagrima* from **Donizetti’s** “The Elixir of Love,” recorded in 1911 for the **Victor Talking Machine Company**.

Clearly, we would not have this recording today if both the **Victor Talking Machine Company**, and **Caruso** himself for that matter, hadn’t felt that it was worth their time and resources to create the recording in the first place. But just as importantly: we have these now, and can incorporate them into a resource like *Wikipedia*, because the content originally captured has been transcribed, migrated, to another medium. The ultimate goal of a recording, beyond the achievement of the immediate financial goals accompanying its creation and sale, is as a kind of “long forward pass” (to use a sports analogy) into the future, in the hopes that there will be someone to receive it once it gets there. As much as this requires an original act of recording, it also demands occasional, probably repeated, acts of migration from one medium to another, as media for the storage of content are born, rise, thrive, fade, and perish.

Throughout, the important thing is the payload, the content itself. The content must not, I repeat, must not, ever, be fundamentally confused with the medium.

Now we can turn to “...the Book as We Know It.”

Gutenberg’s press, and perhaps even more so, the introduction of pulp-based paper, were accompanied by some pretty wild expressions of fear regarding the dire outcomes that would follow. There was by no means universal acceptance of the idea that placing published material before a larger audience was a Good Thing.

Yet see what happened. The rediscovery and reproduction in print of the scientific, mathematical, and philosophical works of ancient Greece, it could be argued, played no small role in triggering, or at least accelerating, the Renaissance, the Modern Age, all of that.

Ah, but the “Manufactured Book as We Know It Today” was a product of the introduction of pulp paper, and that was a nineteenth-century development. Its result was an explosion in the numbers and variety of things being printed, from newspapers to scholarly (or some not-so-scholarly) journals to “serious” books to trashy stuff intended for mass, popular consumption (pulp fiction). For the publishers, it marked the beginning of a toga party that would last well over a hundred years. **Carnegie** built all those libraries to house the stuff for The People. Literacy rates soared. Librarians were at the forefront of the idea that what a person read was a matter of personal, and private, choice.

The irony must never be overlooked: the cheap pulp-based paper brought about the explosion in publication. But what did the medium itself mean to the question of Quality? For content, the proliferation of pseudo-scientific claptrap necessitated the establishment of the doctrine of Peer Review. Additionally, the mass-marketers learned the delightful financial benefits to accrue by following the maxim in content selection, “Give the People What They Want.”

But regarding another facet of Quality: the production of pulp-based paper, having employed acid to break down the pulp fibers in manufacturing, resulted in the creation of a huge body of printed material — basically as huge as all printed material itself — that would self-destruct. Before WordStar, short of microfilm, there was no archival storage medium for all that content.

Not that there ever was. Of all written material — the ideas, the expressions, the instruction, the records, the dreams, from all those centuries prior to the pulp paper era — we will literally never know all that was lost.

We have what we have, ultimately, because it has been handed down through a continuing process of migration, translation, and preservation. It has never been about the artifacts — not in the final analysis. Yes, we need something to migrate, but that must never be confused with or equated, to the epochal ebb and flow of the fortunes of specific industrial sectors or merchandisers.

From time unremembered, the reason to write something was so that it might be read. The “Book as We Know It” is a fairly young thing. The search for gold is far older.