Against the Grain

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Op Ed -- Pelikan's Antidisambiguation: New Technology or Market-share Grab?

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New Technology or Market-share Grab?

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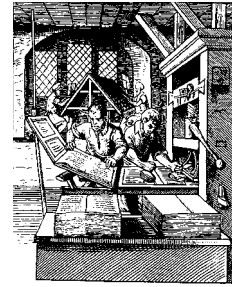
Count me among those who waited with interest to see what **Apple** might announce in the tablet computer / eBook reader domain. My emotional involvement was at nothing like the level of, say, "bated breath," but neither was I oblivious. I would have had to feign disinterest, but at no time did I feel my pulse quicken. I really wanted to see if **Apple** would give us a tablet computer — a slate. I half-expected pronouncements that their decision to do so signified that "The Slate Has Finally Arrived."

But no.

The Globe and Mail headline probably summed it up best: "**Apple's iPad** a small step for technology, a leap for multimedia domination."

How predictable and how disappointing.

In bringing this product to market, **Steve Jobs** wasn't looking with passion at the technological possibilities underlying this new class of devices, the eBook Readers — not by a long shot. Instead, it appears he was looking at what **Amazon** has tried to do with the **Kindle** and said to himself, "Who do those guys think they are? They can't even do color! Wait'll I put my special brand on this content delivery channel! I'll give 'em color, sound, motion, and it'll be An **Apple** — and all through the **iTunes** store! Oh, and textual material too, for those who still read — we'll scoop them up as well..."

In short, the **iPad** represents the brand of leadership wherein you find a parade and try to get in front of it.

And why couldn't they just give us something like the following?

- About the size and weight of a Kindle or a Sony Reader
  √ check
- High-resolution color screen, tough and gesture-sensitive
  √ check
- All kinds of wireless access
  √ check
- Serve as a target platform for virtually any content available over the Internet
  — clunk!

It certainly feels as if **Apple** took a look at the nascent eBook market, took a look at the currently viable devices, and decided the world had it all wrong. Except for the part where **Amazon** tries to position itself as the primary conduit between content producer and consumer — **Jobs** liked that, except that it was

Amazon, not **Apple**. That part had to be stopped, and stopped right now. Everybody knows that role rightfully belongs to **Apple**.

Dagnab it!

The World Wide Web is the single greatest mechanism to move us toward the complete democratization of publishing the world has ever seen. But there are companies, it seems, that will not stand for that. It's not the democratization they can't stand — it's the idea that they might not get their slice of the action.

Such hegemony needs to be fought to a standstill and then reversed. As we began the transition from print to digital, it was exactly such hegemony that seized the day by its throat and declared, "You Shall Pay!" It is exactly such hegemony that threatens the Library in the Academy. The escalation of electronic subscription fees is simple predation. The avarice is so complete, so fixated upon its single purpose, that it cannot even perceive the prospect of its own death, once the targeted veins of rich, flowing lucre run dry. Sheer, blind self-destructiveness, in the guise of greed, lapping at the life blood of a literate society. It's suicide, but the creature is too engrossed in engorging its own blood lust to realize it.

Look. The **Kindle**, the **iPad**, indeed, ANY device which, at the behest of a particular distribution channel, attempts to place itself as the single point of conjunction between producer and consumer — these are to be fought.

Back in the early Nineteen Teens, a German named **Oskar Barnack** had asthma. He was a photographer by avocation, an optical engineer by trade. He was sick and tired (literally) from hauling the heavy photographic gear of the day around, so he came up with a tiny camera that used, of all things, 35-millimeter motion picture film. He convinced the company he was working for, **Ernst Leitz and Co.**, to let him build a few prototypes. These were put to use over the next decade or so, but it wasn't until after the Great War (they didn't know it was only the First World War) that **Leitz** actually manufactured a thousand of the little beauties to test the marketability of the concept.

Well, the rest of the story, of course, is well known. Those cameras were the first-generation **Leicas**. They established the world of 35-millimeter photography, which in turn was adopted by, and changed forever, the creative visual arts.

But here's the point: at no time did **E. Leitz and Co.** say to itself, "Why, let's monopolize these little money makers! Let's be the sole source of film. Let's be the sole source of the means to view the images created with our devices!"

Kodak tried that. The first **Kodak** camera came loaded with enough film for one hundred exposures. Then, after using your film, you'd send the whole camera, still loaded, back to **George Eastman's** company. They'd process the film, print the pictures, reload the camera, and send the whole works back to you, ready to go again. The whole grand idea worked until other camera and film manufacturers (some of them, such as **Ansco**, actually pre-dated **Kodak**) fought back in the marketplace.

Kodak continued to sell both cameras and film, but never really got as far with their cameras as they did with their film. They tried. In 1963 they brought out the **Instamatic** camera system. You didn't even have to touch the film! Just drop in the cartridge! Actually, they sold millions of them. From there they went to the **Pocket Instamatic** (1972).

Polaroid was a continual thorn in **Kodak's** side (starting in the late Nineteen Forties) — they produced a proprietary film that gave you your picture a minute after you took it. The **Polaroid Land Camera** was an astonishing breakthrough, truly exemplary of **Arthur C. Clarke's** declaration that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. And **Polaroid** sold you both the camera and the film, and they had a set of rock-solid patents tying the whole system up. They even had **Kodak** manufacturing their film for a while — but **Kodak** couldn't put their own name on the stuff.

Kodak tried to bust the instant photo market open with the **Kodamatic** process — an instant film system demonstrably different enough from **Polaroid's** that **Kodak** thought they could resist any patent infringement action **Polaroid** might try to stop them. But no good. **Polaroid** filed suit, and **Kodak** had to get out of the instant film business.

Clear sailing for **Polaroid**? Yes — until the digital image sensor put a stop to the whole thing. In February 2008, **Polaroid** announced it was getting out of the instant film business.

The point? Just this: try as these stinkers might, a Day in the Sun is the best many of them can hope for. They can invent and market the stuff — they can seize ascendancy — but at the end of the day they either go the way of the dinosaurs, killed off because they could no longer handle the world, or the way of the Dodo, killed off by some predator giving no thought whatsoever to the consequences.

The ideas are ours. Somebody might own the printing press. We may have to enter into some contractual arrangement for our ideas to be permitted access to their reproductive machinery. Or, we can lease access to the Internet from a service provider and self-publish. But be warned: have a good enough thought, and you're in the cross hairs. Someone may decide it's far less trouble to steal your thought than to make up one of their own. Or, they may condescend to permit you access to the means of distribution to spread your thoughts and ideas far and wide — as long as they get a piece of the action.

But let's never confuse the unveiling of a carefully constrained, carefully controlled, ruthlessly protected market introduction with the act of creativity.

What can we do?

Let's fill the world with simple, inexpensive, light-weight machines running a decent open source operating system — netbooks running Ubuntu, for example — and make THEM the target for a million streams of wonderful, creative content, Project Gutenberg files, MIDI files, great recordings, timeless orations, and yes, even proprietary content you rightfully need to pay for to get at.

Just, please, oh great marketers of the world, please.

Stop telling us that because you've got a roller coaster, you've invented the delightful interplay between mass and gravity.

Stop trying to persuade us that knowing how to make a plastic bread bag means you've discovered the miracle of the leavening process.

Stop trying to palm off a flask as if you've invented the realm of spirits. 🐾

Under the Hood — Feedback Loop

An Interview with Jeff Dietrich, Coutts Information Services

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One of the threads of my last two columns has been feedback, primarily from librarians to vendors of library products. I've spoken about how this feedback needs to be structured in a way so it is clear and usable for the vendor. But is this all that is needed? What does feedback look like from the vendor's perspective?

For this angle, I've asked a guest to join me. **Jeff Dietrich** is a Senior Software Engineer at **Coutts Information Services** and someone with a fluent understanding of the interaction between librarians and the people who build library software. He has managed the **OASIS** engineering team and now works on a broader range of software tools for **Coutts**.

XA: What kind of feedback does your team receive?

JD: It really runs the gamut: detailed feature requests, bug reports, would-be-nice-if suggestions, and the occasional furious denunciation. We definitely don't get as much user input as we'd like to see. What we do see is always welcome and useful, if often incomplete. Users sometimes assume developers are more all-seeing and all-knowing with respect to application activity than they actually are, to the point of not mentioning where in the application a problem occurred, which list or ISBN was involved, what the error message said, and so on.

XA: Why does this feedback matter?

JD: Because user input is the single biggest driver of development decisions, as it should be. I am sure that nearly every **OASIS** user who has spent significant time with it has had creative thoughts and ideas about it. They are keenly aware of those little things that would save time and make things easier, and they no doubt hold opinions about how the way we implemented Feature X is boneheaded, etc. But only a minority of those users take the time to reach out, to engage and collaborate with us on improvements. One of the key ways in which this sets all of us back, is that we as developers often see a clear need for the same improvements and features, since we are heavy **OASIS** users too. But a developer with a dream does not a mandate make. If users thinking along the same lines were speaking their minds, we'd have stronger cases to apply resources to the things that matter to them.

XA: How can libraries structure their input to be more usable?

JD: Detail and context. In-depth user stories and perspectives from the trenches. We need these to understand better how librarians use the application day-to-day, and where the workflow bottlenecks are. It's a useful starting point that a user wants to be able to do X, but the really useful information often hides in *why* they want to do it, and in their creative speculation about what the outcome might look and work and feel like. We can often work backwards from the underlying end goal, and find better solutions than are apparent if we simply take "do X" at face value.

XA: How can libraries make sure their input is given attention and made a high priority?

JD: Feature requests are not easy to generalize about as that goes — they all get prompt attention and generate internal discussion, in any case. When it comes to bugs, step-by-step reproduction cases are the most crucial. If we can reproduce a problem, it can typically be zeroed in on, fixed, tested, and included in a release relatively quickly. Without reproduction steps or enough detail to quickly establish them, precious development time gets burned trying to re-assemble the circumstances of the bug through log analysis, broad review of potentially relevant code, etc. Reports that will cost all of this extra effort to unravel are typically de-prioritized if they are not deemed critical. As more users report the problem, more internal staff become involved, more details become apparent, and the priority ticks upwards. But having better information up front cuts right through all of that. The right degree of detail provided by users can mean the difference between a bug being fixed next week, or three months from now.

XA: From **Jeff's** perspective, the fundamental needs for feedback are not just clarity and structure, as I've discussed previously. The steps needed to reproduce a bug and the details of why a feature would help a library's work are also elements that make for a valuable contribution to a vendor's product. These contributions benefit the vendor, of course, but also the library who requests the change and the wider community that will find the change useful. While **Jeff** comes from work on **OASIS**, an online ordering system, this holds true for the other systems used in libraries, from the ILS to link resolvers, even to social media tools. If we want these products to work for us, we have to start by asking for change. Thanks **Jeff**, for your feedback to librarians! 🐾