



David Rothman TeleRead

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“Try to reward readers for the time spent visiting your blog.”

—David Rothman

David H. Rothman might be thought of as a televangelist, in the sense that he has a cause and promotes it through electronic media. And he is as dedicated to his cause as any fire-and-brimstone preacher ever was. But don't worry: you won't find him pushing religion or calling for offerings. Rothman promotes e-books, e-book standards, and digital libraries. His medium is the Internet, and his podium is the TeleRead blog (www.teleread.org/blog), a nonprofit operation

TeleRead: Bring the E-Books Home
Advocating Well-Stocked National Digital Libraries



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Coming this weekend: DT 375 e-book tips, Cool Reader review and library hacks

To-do list for the next revision of IDPF standards

that accepts neither donations nor advertising. It has been online in one form or another since 1993, when it began on CompuServe.

What exactly is TeleRead? As the site itself explains, it is a plan and group that supports putting e-books in American homes through a well-stocked national digital library system and small, low-cost e-book readers based on a standard (yet to be determined) that is accepted and used by publishers—print and electronic—everywhere.

TeleRead's purpose is not to establish libraries or dispense e-books. Instead, it serves as a clearinghouse for ideas, discussions, and proposals involving e-books, e-book media standards, and digital rights management (DRM). Of course, the site's activities can always change to take advantage of the site's mission.

At times it is a struggle to keep the TeleRead blog (which is often referred to as the TeleBlog) in operation. As noted, TeleRead doesn't accept donations and has no income, not even for advertising. Rothman has wrestled with the question of registering as a nonprofit corporation, concerned that he would have to give up complete freedom of expression in exchange for a tax break. (In connection with this, he heartily recommends the Sinclair Lewis novel *Gideon Planish*, which in part dissects the world of charitable foundations.)

And Rothman does at least 85 percent of the posting and management, with volunteers filling out the rest. So the driving and supporting forces behind TeleRead are truly in Rothman's dedication to the cause.

In addition to TeleRead, Rothman works on several complementary projects, including LibraryCity (www.librarycity.org). This is a project that will put thousands of e-books and other electronic resources online to make them available to librarians, learners, teachers, and readers in general. As the site notes, "Honoring the Carnegie tradition, we intend to reduce the correlation between personal income and access to the best books and other items for self-improvement."

The E-book Cause

In an online world where blogs that aren't personal hobbies or supported by organizations are focused on generating money or fame, the TeleRead blog is a rare example of pure dedication. Read on to see why.

Did you start blogging as an extension of promoting your cause?

Yes. I started TeleRead.org to promote the cause of well-stocked national digital libraries and related matters, especially e-books. The e-book-focused

blog happened because no one else was covering the issues—technical, legal, you name it—in the depth and manner that I wanted.

I'm also interested in stimulating people to provide answers to problems, in a collective process.

Are you achieving what you set out to do with the TeleBlog?

TeleBlog is doing its share, and it is achieving visibility. It helps that we're included in many blogrolls, including *The Wired Campus* blog of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

TeleBlog has been a leader in the area of e-book standards, [which are] very important to the future usability of e-books. E-books aren't going to really become as popular as, say, CDs or MP3s until there is a standard. And I'm talking about one the big publishers are comfortable with, as opposed to simply distributing e-books in ASCII or HTML. That's why John Noring and I started OpenReader [www.openreader.org]. I doubt OpenReader will end up being the final standard, but it has influenced the thinking of the International Digital Publishing Forum [www.idpf.org], and they have taken e-book standards a lot more seriously as a result of OpenReader, which arose from TeleBlog.

Our traffic is pretty good for a specialized site. It's hard to pin down the number of readers because many read us on RSS. The number of unique visitors per day is typically in the region of a thousand.

*"I learn from
interaction with my
readers."*

But there are times when the accesses are well above one thousand.

We are interested in sponsors, but they have to be people who won't try to influence the content of the site in ways that could be very harmful to our credibility.

Again, though, please understand I didn't start TeleRead to make money. The talk about donations or other support is simply a matter of sustainability. We have avoided appeals for small donations except for a quick experiment with an Amazon tip jar.

How much time do you think you spend on the blog?

It can vary all over the place. Sometimes it'll be just a few hours a day. Sometimes I'll just bang out something and focus on a book or whatever else I might be up to.

But some days—and this is where I need badly to find the right business model—sometimes it can take up most of the day, or a working day and then some.

As I've implied, for now the blog is financially a disaster. But the operative words are “for now.” I'm convinced that something good will happen. If nothing else, possibly the LibraryCity project will work out, and that can be a source of income for me and for others.

What is your source of inspiration for postings? Do you read many other blogs?

Basically I combine news items with my years of writing about e-books, and come up with connections that might elude other people. I get some great ideas from readers, but basically I do a lot of surfing and a lot of RSS-ing.

As for other blogs, I look at them directly and I follow them through RSS feeds. I have hundreds in my reader. I'm not claiming to read every weekly item from the hundreds of blogs I follow, but I'll read RSS on my desktop, I'll read it on my tablet, I'll read RSS even on my Palm TX PDA.

My ambition is to be in a position where I'm reading fewer rather than more feeds. I'd much rather be reading books than RSS feeds. This is the way in which the blog is a time sink, in that you can't do a good job without keeping up with the rest of the world, and that takes time. But the mainstream people don't care sufficiently about e-book-format standards and other important topics. And more than a few are clueless on topics such as draconian DRM. So I work to bring information to the public.

Do you have time to do much posting on other blogs?

I do occasional posts, and every now and then I attempt to get slashdotted, but I generally stay within the confines of the TeleBlog, because I feel that I have so much to cover for the blog that I just can't take time out to be all over the net.

I know it sounds hypocritical, but because the blog has become such a centralized hub for the e-book world (it's not the only one out there, but it's one of the major sites), people are posting not only in their home blog, but also coming to us with some real gems. I love it when they share. And they in turn get greater exposure in most cases. I figure that by tending my own little garden, I can better fertilize the ground for other people.

What do you do to bring in new readers?

I'm not doing anything special to attract readers, other than trying to provide a quality site and blog. Normally, readers and the media just find me. This is a concern for me. I'm very frustrated that I can't clone myself, so that one David can do the blog and the other promote it.

I have been fortunate to have gotten media attention over the years. I get quoted in publications like *Newsday*, and I've been mentioned on the National Public Radio (NPR) website. In the past, TeleRead has been included in *The New York Times* site list, and *The Washington Post* has linked to TeleRead.

Ironically I'm often outdrawing <http://libraryjournal.com>, according to <http://alexa.com>, although neither of us would be in the big leagues.

Do you have any favorite blog tools or widgets you use with TeleBlog?

WordPress provides much of the functionality we need. Its disadvantages are many, but it works. I use a wide variety of plug-ins. A recent addition was MyBlogLog, a reader community tool that displays photos of its members. It is helping us reel in visitors. Various other additions provide pictures in postings and the display of recent comment excerpts in the blog's margin. We are currently looking for a new translation service.

That last is really useful, because 40 to 50 percent of our traffic is from overseas—Eastern Europe, in particular. I think people in other countries see e-books as a way to drive down the cost of reading.

“I see some blogs that are nothing more than disguised outlets for news releases, and this is unfortunate, as those blogs could be offering fresh information and raising questions.”

What is the most difficult part of blogging for you?

My main problem is time. And I would like to see more participation in the blog by readers. We're not doing too badly, but we could do better.

But the biggest frustration is the lack of a decent business model. If I charged for membership, then people would just gravitate to free sources

of e-book news and views. Advertising? It's a possibility, but keep in mind that I've tried hard to keep TeleRead a noncommercial site.

Another frustration is not having enough volunteers to help with the writing and other tasks. I'm very thankful to Robert Nagle for pitching in with hosting and technical services. Still, I do maybe 85 percent of the posts myself.

And yes, I think about quitting from time to time. And yes, it's possible that I might take some of the things I'm doing with the blog and use the same skills in a more commercial way. But when I get discouraged, people come to me with things to post and that prods me on. We get some great ideas from people who are reading the blog, and it actually can be very interesting to have thousands of different editors looking at posts.

Do you consider bloggers journalists?

I think it's going to vary according to the blog. Some blogs just pass along news releases, but others really are interested in informing the reader, so I'd like to think that TeleBlog is practicing journalism, though it's not traditional journalism in the sense that the coverage is influenced by the cause.

What was your most gratifying experience as a blogger?

Helping David Faucheux get his blog into TeleRead. David is a blind librarian who holds a Master of Library and Information Science degree and has written both fiction and nonfiction reviews for *Library Journal*. He used his blog, Blind Chance [www.teleread.org/blind], to build an online portfolio. When Audioblogger disappeared without explanation, I helped him move Blind Chance to TeleRead. I later convinced Audioblogger's new corporate owners to restore the audio on company servers.

Blind Chance has been on TeleRead since May 2004, and provides both audio and text versions of David's postings.

Your blog isn't for money or notoriety, but you put a lot of time and energy into it. Is there any benefit that you, personally, derive from the blog?

Well, certainly I get my share of fame within the e-book world. Just about everyone who's anyone in the industry knows of me, so it has been good in terms of being famous and infamous and whatever. But the main benefit is that my activities promote the cause.

I learn from interaction with my readers. They tell me when I'm right and when I'm wrong, and this is so much better than the usual journalistic situations, where readers don't feel as free to comment. My quest for dialogue is also one reason why I'm so keen on interactive e-books. The blog gives me a far, far better understanding of interactivity than books and academic studies could.

What do you think of the blogging world at large?

I see bloggers as being able to assume a unique role in the scheme of things. Some blogs try to provide news, to function just like a newspaper, though usually specialized. But I see a different potential for bloggers, a role in which bloggers raise questions. But a blogger typically doesn't have the time or resources to get the final answers to those questions. This is where traditional journalism comes in, to answer those questions.

Yes, it's true that bloggers have "answers" in terms of their opinions, but in terms of answers on specific issues, there ought to be a synergy between the mainstream media and the blog world.

Not a lot of bloggers appreciate how much energy is involved in news-gathering for the mainstream media. It's true that you can get a lot of information from documents. I did reporting, for example, under a grant years ago from the Fund for Investigative Journalism, and a lot of my work involved interpretation of documents. But that is not all that's involved in gathering news. A lot of what the media does involves interaction either over the phone or in person with newsmakers. And because most bloggers blog in their off hours, they're not going to have the same interaction with newsmakers that members of the mainstream media have.

On the other hand, the members of the mainstream media are so busy gathering news that they may lack time for reflection, and they may be so interested in immediate details that they fail to connect the dots.

But if a synergism is established, the media will notice the questions raised by bloggers, and some good hard news stories will result.

"I'm not just interested in providing answers. I am interested in stimulating people to provide answers themselves."

So I'm not just interested in providing answers. I am interested in stimulating people to provide answers themselves, in a collective process, though I'd like to think that the TeleBlog is practicing journalism. It's just not traditional journalism in the sense that the coverage is influenced by the cause.

I see some blogs that are nothing more than disguised outlets for news releases, and this is unfortunate, as those blogs could be offering fresh information and raising questions.

I also have to say that, as a group, the major e-book and publishing-related blogs, and others associated with publishing and writing, tend to be better than blogs as a whole. This is true not just in the writing, which is to be expected, but in the overall organization and quality.

And there is the integrity issue. If I find adverse information about e-books, I'm going to put it in the blog. In fact I *want* to put it in the blog, so people can think about answers—whereas a lot of people who might have a cause to advocate will let that limit the kind of coverage they do.

Do you have any specific advice for other bloggers—to do a better job, to attract readers, whatever the positives may be?

My biggest advice is to work to get people information that is relevant to them. Don't just come up with arguments; provide information along the way. It's a way to reward people for the time they spend visiting your blog. A newsy approach is always better than a static, pamphleteering one.

Points to Review

David Rothman's dedication is sincere, as evidenced by the energy and time he puts into TeleRead and his other projects. It also shows in the depth and quality of TeleBlog's posts and comments. The success of TeleBlog is largely due to that dedication, along with these considerations:

- Combining news with one's personal background and perspective can make for more interesting blog posts.
- An important role of bloggers is to raise questions and encourage others to provide answers in a group setting.
- Give readers something extra in the way of information as a reward for visiting your blog.