

Info Tech Column  
Due September 2, 2008  
**Information Outlook**, October 2008 Issue

## **Observing Tech Change in the Real World**

by Stephen Abram

I've long been an advocate of just observing human behaviour in the real world and playing with technologies in the consumer space as a way of keeping up, understanding change, and sensing the future. People often just nod but sometimes they ask, "How?" So, I thought I'd devote this month's column to a few short examples of how and where to watch user behaviour. This past year has been a banner year for observing some seismic shifts in our users' context, technologies and adoption phase. I believe that when stuff is reaching the general public's consciousness that we're obliged to take notice. I also think we can argue to many special librarians serve a specific segment of the marketplace that is more likely to adopt some changes more quickly – wealthier, computer literate, employed, better educated, more likely to travel, own an up-to-date cel phone and more information and communication needy. So that's **who** we're watching – everyone, but especially our target users.

So let's do some quick highlights of the what, where, how and why. (The **when** is simply anytime!)

### **What?**

A few current events have been gifting us this year with some natural observation and conversation moments to do a little modern on-the-fly cultural ethnography. For example:

#### ***The 2008 Beijing Olympics***

Aren't you amazed by the real time streaming media at this Olympics – event by event? And the time-shifting ability to watch all events without the draconian big network filter was awesome. If you're nuts for gymnastics you could easily throw out your TV guide this Summer Olympics and assemble your own personal Olympics! Some measures say that Yahoo beat NBC and MSNBC in audience. Incredible! So, what does that tell us about the penetration of web video and streaming into the North American marketplace? Are we catching up to Europe and Pacific Rim? What are our users more ready for now?

#### ***eBooks from Amazon et al – The Kindle and Sony Reader***

Is this the tipping point year? Probably not but it's getting close, don't you think? Do they like it? How do they load their books? What titles? Have they tried newsfeeds? Anything work related yet? What do they think if DRM?

### ***The Old iPhone and New G3 iPhone***

We got gifted with the launch of the G3 iPhone and I don't think sliced bread got this much word of mouth! By autumn we'll have the first Android phone based on Google's Open Handset Alliance. Believe me this is a crossing the chasm level shift for North America. So ask folks you see, what downloads are on your phone? Music? Ringtones? Applications (golf? Facebook?)? Nothing? Check out the Apple download center and see what's there.

### ***The U.S. 2008 Election***

This election is not just engaging as a horse race (and I can't even vote in it!) but it's also fascinating from a technology point of view. When the history books are written it's a sure bet that the role new technology played will be identified as a major factor in the outcome. From YouTubing candidates, blogklatches to texting a VP choice, tech is this election's sweaty Nixon. I've signed on to services from both presidential candidates to follow how they use the tools for communication, fundraising, emergency spin, etc. It's fascinating.

I am told and observe that such socially driven tools as blogs, YouTube, Second Life, MySpace, Facebook, Wikipedia, Ning, Twitter, Mozes, NowPublic, and MyBlogLog are critical to electioneering success in 2008. And you don't get much more social than a big national election where the critical stuff is so completely local. Hmmmm, libraries are social too (even associations).

### ***The Summer 2008 Facebook & MySpace Changes***

In the past few months we've seen major design changes at the big social networking sites. You've seen what changed on your Facebook presence. Check out your 'friends'. What have they downloaded? What apps are interesting to them? Check out your wall and see alerts about what's new and hot. What are they downloading or joining? Observing human behaviour doesn't always have to be in person!

### ***iPod – What's on your iPod?***

Share your songs and artists too. It's only intrusive if you get too insistent. What are they using – their own CD's? LimeWire, iTunes, the public library or whatever? Just music or audiobooks, MTV, CNN, movies or TV shows too? Are they original rippers from the Napster era when it was an underground activity or just when did they make the switch from disc? What do their kids/parents use? Is anyone noticing the Pandora troubles?

### ***Where?***

Anywhere! Really! I watch people in grocery stores. When they're taking pictures of food boxes, surfing competitor prices on their iPhone, or texting the recipe to the kids to turn on the oven NOW, I'd say some behaviours are changing. Seeing students take a photo of the OPAC record or text it to themselves rather than write a paper note is an observable shift. It's a small

change that tells me something about note taking and OPAC functionality. And toy stores are a real feast. You can see toys doing things that intranets will do next year. I worry I might get kicked out of Toys R Us for staring. I doubt security will believe I'm just doing research. Anyway, here are a few more prime spots:

Academic Information and Knowledge Commons are neat places. Walk around and surreptitiously shoulder surf. What are users' website choices, gaming choices, e-mail choices, social sites, etc.? Are they multitasking, e-learning, Facebooking? How many windows are open? Are they using headphones, thumb drives? It's hard to get students to explain what they're doing since they don't actually know what is so different. So just watch.

When you're visiting friends look at their homes. Check out big screen TV's, cable access, wireless connectivity, set top boxes, satellite dishes, satellite radio, etc. What's the state of the art in your cohort? Do the same thing with your friends' and acquaintances' cars. See any satellite radio, GPS systems, USB drives, Bluetooth? Is anyone using audiobooks on their commute? How do they use the cel phone while driving?

I spend a lot of time on commuter trains, buses and planes and in the lounges of airports and hotels. I look around and see eBook readers, MP3 players, phones, video players, laptops, and more. It's a great place to strike up a conversation and learn. What percentages of kids, mall walkers, or seniors are on their phones while they walk? And that brings us to **how?**

### **How?**

First just watch, that's usually enough. When you see something worth pursuing, just ask. Friendly places like libraries, hotels, conference centers, airport lounges, shopping lines, etc. tend to result in friendly conversations. Use your own best judgment. Appeal to their egos. (Yeah, I can stoop pretty low!)

"Ooooooh! You've got a Kindle (or Sony Reader, iPhone, cool MP3 player, whatever). Do you like it? Is it as cool as they say?"

"Oh I'm thinking about getting an iPod/MP3 player just like yours! How do you like it? What do you use it for – just songs or TV shows and podcasts too?"

"Your phone is different. It looks pretty *sick* [that currently means cool in kidspeak but YMMV], what's new about it?"

You get the idea. It's just reference interviewing with tricky social stuff added.

### **Why?**

That's the easiest question. We're a curious profession. We're maybe the most curious profession! After a few weeks of doing this we'll be better informed than some market researchers. And then we're the 'go to' folks for technology advice as our organizations struggle with the latest bump on the tech adoption curve.

And that's where we belong.

*Stephen Abram, MLS the President 2008 of SLA and is Vice President, Innovation, for SirsiDynix. He is Chief Strategist for the SirsiDynix Institute. He is an SLA Fellow and the past president of the Ontario Library Association and the past president of the Canadian Library Association. In June 2003 he was awarded SLA's John Cotton Dana Award. He is the author of Out Front with Stephen Abram and Stephen's Lighthouse blog. This column contains Stephen's personal perspectives and does not necessarily represent the opinions or positions of SirsiDynix. Stephen would love to hear from you at [stephen.abram@gmail.com](mailto:stephen.abram@gmail.com).*