

The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less or More, Chris Anderson. Hyperion, New York (2006). \$24.95, ISBN: 1-4013-0237-8

The Long Tail: How Technology is turning mass markets into millions of niches. (p. 15).

This passage from The Long Tail, pretty much sums it all up. The Long Tail by Chris Anderson is a good and worthwhile read for information scientists, computer scientists, ecommerce researchers, and others interested in all areas of Web research.

The central premise of the book is that the combination of (1) the Pareto or Zipf distribution (i.e., power law probability distribution) that is characteristic of Web traffic and (2) the direct access to consumers via Web technology has opened up new business opportunities in the “long tail”. Producers and advertisers no longer have to target “the big hits” at the head of the distribution. Instead, they can target the small, niche communities or even individuals in the tail of the distribution.

The long tail is has been studied by Web researchers and has been noted in term usage on search engines, access times to servers, and popularity of Web sites. Andersen points out that the long tail also applies to products sold on the Web. He recounts that a sizeable percentage of Amazon sales come from books that only sell a few copies, a large number of songs from Rhapsody get downloaded only once in a month, and a significant number of movies from Netflix only get ordered occasionally. However, since the storage is in digital form for the songs and music (and Amazon out sources the storage of books) there is little additional inventory cost of these items. This phenomenon across all Web companies has led to a broadening of participation by both producers and consumers that would not have happened without the Web.

The idea of the long tail is well known, of course. What Anderson has done is present it in an interesting manner and in a Web ecommerce setting. He applies it to Web businesses and then relates the multitude of other factors on-going that permit the actual implementation of the long tail effect. Anderson also expands on prior work on the long tail by introducing an element of time, given the distribution a three dimensional effect. All in all, it is a nifty idea.

The book is comprised of 14 chapters, plus an Introduction. Chapter 1 presents an overview of what the long tail is. Chapter 2 discusses the “head”, which is the top of the tail where the mega hits are. Chapter 3 presents a short history of the Long Tail (interesting play on words). Chapter 4 discusses the three forces of the Long Tail (e.g., make it, get it out there, and help me find it), which was extremely interesting. I found this section of the book very engaging and well done.

Chapter 5 discusses the new producers. Chapter 6 discusses the new market. Chapter 7 discusses the new tastemakers. For me, these three chapters dragged. I could not wait to them to be over with.

However, the book picks up again with Chapter 8, the Long Tail economics. Chapter 9 discusses the short head (significant linkage to Chapter 2). Chapter 10 is a very nice discussion on the pros and cons of choice, ending with the position that almost always, more choice is better as long as the tools to make sense of it are available. This chapter has a lot of application for Web search researchers. Chapter 11 discusses the niche culture (links to Chapter 4).

The next three chapters were shaky in terms of supporting material. Chapter 12 was the infinite screen – the move for video to be online instead of on television. Chapter 13 discusses the long tail beyond entertainment, to manufacturing and services. This chapter has some attention-grabbing ideas. Chapter 14 was why the long tail rules. These three chapters, although motivating in some respects, left more questions than they provided answers.

There was a short snippet at the end of the book on a three dimensional printer and why this might be the long tail of tomorrow. Very interesting prediction of what may be possible in the near future. There is also a very short and totally inadequate notes and sources section. A book with this reach, with so many linkages to Web research, should be more adequately referenced.

There were a few positions taken in the book that were not well support or suffered from serious omissions. In a discussion of the liberal “sharing of ideas” on the Web, the author quotes Thomas Jefferson who stated that just because someone takes an idea, it doesn’t diminish the original idea at all. Certainly, there is an element of truth to this statement. What the author fails to mention is that Jefferson died horribly in debt. Additionally, while Jefferson certainly said this, he practiced something totally different. For example, he was very protective of his authorship of the Declaration of Independence as noted by his response to the Mecklenburg Declaration that called his authorship into question.

Similarly, Anderson comments on how do-it-yourself publishing is revolutionizing the book industry. I found this section odd – coming as it does within a traditionally published book. Things may change one day, but obviously not today and not for Anderson.

Finally, the “I love Google” comments and sections sprinkled throughout the book got old fast. Google is a fine search engine, but numerous studies show that all the major search engines return similar and just as relevant results. The “Google love-fest” among the *Wired*, *Industry Standard* crowd makes one wonder about the objectivity of reports from these outlets. For example, in [The Long Tail](#), Anderson mentions that Google developed their sponsored search process based on Bill Gross’s original idea, but he fails to mention that Google settled a patent infringement suit in 2004. Google is great search engine. So are Yahoo! and MSN Live Search. Moreover, there are a multiple of other search engines out there. Where is the “long tail” in search?

One thing that has always troubled me about the long tail phenomenon is that it occurs so often in so many contents. On one hand, it certainly explains a lot. However, given that it explains so much, one could also say that it explains too much and therefore nothing to any degree. It leads me to believe that there are other mathematical trends hidden within the long tail that could offer more detailed explanations of occurrences within specific domains.

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