We Are All Actors
Act 2, Scene 8
"An Audience Never to be Born"

by
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INT. AN OFFICE

DANIEL, the director of research for a non-partisan policy
think-tank, paces back and forth in front of a bookcase.
After a minute, he walks over to a desk and picks up the
telephone.

                    DANIEL
          Hello? Jenny?

JENNY, a research assistant, sits at her desk in another
room.

                    JENNY
          Hello Daniel. What's up?

                    DANIEL
          I'm stuck and I'm hoping you have
          an idea about how to get me
          unstuck.

                    JENNY
          Let me just reach into my magic bag
          of ideas here.... OK, got one!

                    DANIEL
          Very funny. Here's the problem. I
          need to send an email about the new
          highway spending bill, but I'm
          having trouble putting together
          anything people will actually read.

                    JENNY
          What do you mean?

                    DANIEL
          It's the same problem I have all
          the time. I want to highlight a
          few issues in the bill, but there's
          nowhere I can send people that lets
          them see the issue in context
          without reading too much.

                    JENNY
          You could send them to the Thomas
          website.

DANIEL sits on the corner of his desk.

                    DANIEL
          I could, but it's not easy to do
          that without being confusing.

                    (MORE)

                    DANIEL (cont'd)
I can get the whole text of the
bill in PDF from Thomas, but nobody
wants to read the whole bill, and
nobody wants to install Acrobat
reader, open a big file, and page
down to page 77. I can send people
to the paragraph I'm talking about,
but it's just sitting there in a
huge mass of other stuff they don't
really care about, and they might
get lost.

                    JENNY
Don't you usually just copy the
relevant sections and paste them
into your email?

                    DANIEL
Yeah, but that causes big problems
when people want to look at the
context. It's kind of hard to
point them to the right place - I'm
right back to sending them to page
77 again, or directing them to
paragraph 130. That's bad enough,
but it gets even worse, because
when the bill is redrafted or
amended, all of a sudden the
references point to the wrong
place.

JENNY gets up and starts pacing while talking.

                    JENNY
You know, I've been having the same
problem with commentary. When we
want to quote another
organization's report on a subject,
we have to copy a quote into an
email, but there's usually context
in the report that's interesting
and is too long to just copy into
our materials. It's like
Goldilocks and the Three Bears - we
can't usually find a chunk of
information that's "juuust right".

DANIEL stands up too.

                    DANIEL
Yeah! I wish I could just blow the
bills up into tiny little pieces,
like a sentence or a paragraph, and
give each one a label so it would
be easy to refer to - like the
chapter and verse numbers in the
Bible or something.

                    JENNY
That would be really useful. And
of course legislation is already
organized that way on paper - by
bill number, section, paragraph and
so on. The organization just isn't
translated into electronic form
very well.

                    DANIEL
You're right - why is that?

                    JENNY
I'm not sure - maybe nobody's
gotten around to doing it yet. But
for what I'm doing it's not really
enough to organize the bills that
way. We need to organize the
commentary the same way too.

                    DANIEL
The Bible does that too - you know
in reference Bibles there are all
kinds of little notes and cross-
references in the margin. And in
the Talmud, the commentary is right
on the page with the text, complete
with the commentators' names and
everything.

                    JENNY
It would be really cool to have
commentary on legislation organized
that way, with links in both
directions, so you could get from
the commentary to the bill text,
but also go backwards from the bill
text to find all the comments on
it.

                    DANIEL
That's exactly what I need. If I
had that I could just send an email
that says "we've analyzed House
Resolution 1777, section 3 parts
(b) - (d). You can find the text
at this link. If you follow the
link you can find our analysis and
everyone else's comments too."

                    JENNY
Our readers would really love that.
A lot of them have trouble finding
out what we've done on an issue.

                    DANIEL
Really?

                    JENNY
Yeah! They can Google our name and
some terms describing the issue,
and they'll usually get some hits,
but most of the time what they get
is a link to one of our reports.

                    DANIEL
And then they've got to read a 50-
page PDF file, just like I do when
I'm trying to extract the text from
a bill.

                    JENNY
Yeah, and the report has all sorts
of commentary on other issues that
aren't what they're looking for. It
would be great if they could just
go to the issue and have our work
on that specific issue magically
appear in the margins.

                    DANIEL
That would solve another problem I
have too - I never know when I'm
done searching.

                    JENNY
You lost me.

                    DANIEL

> Well, if I'm trying to find facts
> related to an issue, or analysis
> from experts, I can do Google
> searches and ask reference
> librarians, but I always have this
> sinking feeling that if I just
> followed a few more links or typed
> some smarter terms into the search
> box I'd find something really good
> that I've missed.

                    JENNY
> OK, I get that feeling too, but how
> does blowing the bills up into
> little pieces help with that?

                    DANIEL
> I guess it doesn't, exactly. But
> if everybody knows the bill is
> online in an easy-to-reference
> form, and if everybody goes there
> to add their research and
> commentary, then all the
> information can end up in one
> place.

                    JENNY
> Oh, you mean like a network effect.

                    DANIEL
> I think so - because as soon as the
> blown-up-little-pieces repository
> gets to be well-known as the most
> useful place to find infomration,
> people who want their information
> to be useful will want to put it
> there.

                    JENNY
> That makes sense. I'd certainly
> put my research into a place like
> that if it existed, because I think
> it would make it easier for my
> customers to find it and use it and
> reference it.

DANIEL sits down at his desk and starts to write some notes
on a notepad.

                    DANIEL
> There isn't anything out there like
> this, though, is there?

                    JENNY
Nope.

                    DANIEL
So you haven't given me an idea.

                    JENNY
Yes I have. I just haven't solved
your problem.

                    DANIEL
OK, you got me there. But it could
exist, right?

                    JENNY
Sure. If somebody builds it.

                    DANIEL
What would it look like?

                    JENNY
Well, it would need a database on
the back end, because you have to
have somewhere to keep the little
pieces after you've blown things
up. And it would need a tool to
link things together, so we could
link our analysis to the original
text. And of course the hardest
part would be the interface - it
would have to have some way to show
people all the pieces and how
they're linked together.

                    DANIEL
You're making it sound complicated.

                    JENNY
It's too complicated for us to
build by ourselves.

                    DANIEL
Do we have to pay somebody to build
it? We probably don't have the
funds for that.

                    JENNY
Maybe not. Since we and a whole
bunch of other people would be
using it together, maybe we could
build it together as an open-source
project.

                    DANIEL
Really?

                    JENNY
Sure. Why not?