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The Decline of the Poultry Selector: Thoughts on the Virtual Approval Plan

by **Stephen Pugh** (Senior Vice President, International Division, YBP Library Services/Lindsay & Howes)

What is a virtual approval plan? For the purposes of this article I have been asked to speculate just a bit. It is not a review mechanism for eBooks, but a way to evaluate printed material prior to purchase by means of linked metadata. As such, it would replace the two integral allocation components of the traditional approval plan — electronic/paper notification slips and books shipped automatically. Essentially it would turn every approval plan into a notification slips plan. Technically very cool, highly evolved, and dazzlingly rich in relevant content to be sure — slips on steroids. What are the implications and realities for library review and selection? It is highly probable that it would accelerate the already robust trend toward profile-based selection and the attendant waning of title-by-title selection of books by professional librarians. If true, monographs acquisition would increasingly resemble the packaged structures already common with e-books and journals — with the package represented by the profile.

Several years ago, near the climax of a long and sweltering four-day approval profiling session at a large land grant university, I found myself oddly looking forward to the final meeting on the schedule — the Poultry Selector. My curiosity had been aroused by this looming appointment. Surely this was an individual whose scope of inquiry was so narrow as to permit him to examine every monograph published in his field with lov-

ing care and in minute detail. At his leisure, he could linger critically over every footnote, research the scholarly output of the authors, read every review, lose himself in the indexing, and luxuriously digest the material like a fine five-course meal. Finally, after determining where the threads of each book properly lie in the intricate warp and weft of the university's Poultry Science interest, he could accept or reject it. What would such a selector possibly need with a carefully crafted and precise approval profile? Either he wants the 20-30 titles published annually in Poultry Science or he doesn't. He certainly doesn't require notification slips — paper or electronic. He might, however, benefit from a virtual approval plan if it provided an acceptable analog to his "paper & ink" selection regimen. In turn, his Library might benefit marginally by saving the time and money it costs to return rejected material. This assumes, of course, that vendors would ban returns for those libraries that are not already "shelf-ready" in a virtual environment.

Sadly perhaps, the Poultry Selector simultaneously represents the best candidate for a virtual approval plan and a lonely sentinel of a dying breed. Subject bibliography (conscious, measured and informed collection building) in such sole specialties is seen less and less outside of the very largest research

libraries. In many international universities it is more or less absent entirely as the faculty is responsible for choosing material and the library simply buys as much of it as it can afford — often on a "first in, first ordered" basis, sometimes in multiple copies. Academics possess enviable expertise (including a perfectly reasonable, but overriding, interest in their own research specialties), but few are concerned with strategically building a library collection in support of wider goals.

The reality is that many selectors now have little, or in any case not enough, time for reviewing approval material. Some report they are able to devote as little as 5% of their time in collection building activities. Despite this, they are responsible for enormous areas of scholarly discourse and are burdened with impossibly broad titles such as Humanities Bibliographer, Science Liaison or Social Sciences Selector. Many complain that their administrators do not value review as it is not easily measured, benchmarked or otherwise statistically defined except in the most useless of ways — raw title numbers. If done properly, professional evaluation demands judgment, discernment, expertise and a host of other intangible qualities. Ideally it is a painstaking title-by-title enterprise whose benefits are measured in decades not quarters. As a professional pursuit it has a great deal of intellectual appeal to many librarians, but on a day-to-day basis it is often pushed aside in favor of other priorities or, as pointed out above, is absent or disappearing.

Would a virtual approval plan help these selectors? It is doubtful that more than a small minority of dedicated and persistent librarians could find the time to use it on a regular basis. I have yet to meet anyone who claims to enjoy reading online. Yet the virtual approval plan could effectively double the number of titles that require computer-assisted review for a library with a mature approval plan (50% or more profiled titles shipped automatically). A large approval profile may yield 1000 titles per week. Even if an ILS vendor could quickly synthesize all the relevant metadata for each new title into a convenient package, imagine competently and comfortably reviewing 250 of these titles in only 5% of your time. Should your mind reel at this unhappy prospect, you might consider using the virtual approval plan to simply supplement "normal" selection for particularly difficult titles (leaving open the ques-

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AUTHOR BIO

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granted the opportunity to gain more collection depth as a result of the decline of duplication. The process of reviewing all the virtual books would also alert the librarians about the collection strengths of the other libraries, and this would build a community sense of the Consortium collection as a whole.

We know we would save time in processing, but in the end, would bibliographers save time by using the virtual shelf? This remains to be seen. It could well be that the time needed to read large amounts of data for each book and make decisions would be even more time-consuming than the weekly meetings

currently taking place for the **Bi-College** plan. It would be an adjustment for librarians to view content online rather than physically, and the impact of this cannot easily be measured. It is also possible that in the initial phases of implementation the time spent on decision-making could be considerable, but as we got to know each others' collections and developed specific subject strengths, we could strive to perfect our **Tri-College** approval plan profile to such an extent that only books in a few subject areas would need to be reviewed in detail. It is very hard to predict what impact a virtual approval shelf would have until we have had a chance to test it, but we are intrigued by the possibilities that such a tool could present to us.



ERSKINE COLLEGE AND THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

by John Kennerly (Erskine College) <kennerly@erskine.edu>

About Erskine College: Erskine College (EC) was founded by the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church in 1839. Prior to this time the church had established in Due West, SC, an academy for men in 1835. Erskine Theological Seminary (ETS) was founded in 1837. EC offers the Bachelor of Arts and the Bachelor of Science degrees. ETS offers the Doctor of Ministry degree as well as six masters level degrees: Master of Divinity, M.A. in Christian Education, M.A. in Counseling Ministry, M.A. in Pastoral Ministry, M.A. in Theological Studies, and Master of Church Music. The combined FTE enrollment for the fall of 2001 was 777 (582, College / 195, Seminary).

About McCain Library, its staff and organization: McCain Library was built in 1949 and named in honor of Dr. J. I. McCain, head of the English Department at Erskine College for forty-nine years. In 1973, an addition was made, more than doubling library space to 22,500 square feet and creating the facility that you see today. McCain Library serves both the College and the Seminary. The library participates in the Federal Depository Library Program, serving as a selective depository for U.S. government documents. The archive consists of materials relating to the College, the Seminary, the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, Abbeville County (S.C.), and genealogical records. The library also maintains special collections of materials with special significance to the institution or to the historical preservation of unique information and items. [More info available at www.erskine.edu/library/aboutml.htm]

Library Staff:

Shirley Adams, Acquisitions and Office Manager
Dallas Ashley, Technical Services Assistant (part-time)
Edith Brawley, Cataloger and Archivist (part-time)
Fred Guyette, Reference and Government Documents Librarian
John Kennerly, Library Director
Sara Morrison, ILL and Cataloging Librarian
Beth Smith, Circulation and Serials Manager
Brian Smith, Systems Manager and Webmaster

About Acquisitions and Collection Development at McCain Library: Number of books, journals, electronic resources

Books: 156,800 vols.

Journals: 892 total subscriptions (483 print, 218 microform, 191 electronic)

[In addition, over 7,000 full-text titles available through online databases]

Electronic Resources: 102 databases (84 online, 18 CD-ROM)

Budget for materials: \$165,500 (2001/02)
 \$201,800 (approved for 2002/03)

Staff in the department(s): The three professional librarians serve as departmental liaisons to the teaching faculty in assigned departments for consultation on collection development efforts. One non-professional staff member handles the ordering of materials.

Vendors used for books and journals and electronic resources:

Primary vendors: Baker & Taylor, EBSCO, Gale, OCLC

Secondary vendors: Ambassador, Amazon.com, Brodart, Out-of-print Dealers online (i.e. Advanced Book Exchange, Bibliofind, etc.)

ILS system: Voyager (Endeavor Information Systems) since the summer of 2000

Future plans: Coordinate the move of archives and special collections into the soon-to-be-completed library annex.

See through an approved plan to increase the library's materials budget for print monographs by 14% per year over the next five years.

Seek further opportunities to subscribe to electronic journals.

Seek new subscriptions to at least one key database in the disciplines of history and psychology, with preference given to full-text databases.

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tion of supplementing what — traditional electronic slips?). While the frequent and occasionally plaintive comments I receive are admittedly anecdotal, it is nevertheless instructive to note that it is common for other expensive supplemental online review media, such as **Choice Online**, to go begging in many libraries.

It is true that the elimination of returns, if viewed myopically, could save both the library and the vendor time and money. The library would not have to pay to return unwanted monographs to the vendor and the vendor could ship fewer books to the library. However, shipping fewer books will not necessarily gladden the hearts of vendors if they suspect it will reduce sales. In any case, the savings would be marginal when compared with library materials budgets or the cost to the vendor in the production or purchase of virtual notification slips. For the growing number of shelf-ready libraries (where books are supplied fully cataloged and end-processed) the question of returns has already been rendered moot. On the international side, the traditional approval plan with a large component of automatic books scarcely exists (the exceptions include, most notably, Hong Kong). Most profiles are confined to notification slips and consequently the return of rejected titles is not an issue.

Another sobering consideration for the vendor is the timeliness of the metadata supporting the virtual approval plan. From the callow debut of the modern approval plan in the golden age of the 1960s and 70s, one of its chief features (and biggest selling points) has been its timeliness — books are shipped or notification slips made available almost immediately upon publication. How swiftly can the metadata required be created, assembled, linked and made available? Who will pay for this process and who will do the work — the vendor, the publishers, the ILS vendors, the bibliographic utilities? Can it be created in time for the vendor to incorporate it in the buying or profiling processes?

The best argument for a virtual approval plan is not that it would save money, but that it would improve the quality of profiles for shelf-ready libraries. The best profiles are ever-changing organisms, surgically crafted and under constant review. In the end, profiles are just sophisticated tools and tools must be kept sharp. Vendors are now capable of capturing an astonishing array of data on approval plan activity. Reports can be effortlessly produced that parse profile activity more ways than a Ronco Vegematic. However, the most useful information in evaluating a profile remains data on rejected titles. I vividly remember toiling long and hard with a number of libraries to reduce return rates to an acceptable level in advance of shelf-ready implementation. As soon as implementation occurred and return privileges were eliminated, we were flying blind. Although urged to report what they would have rejected if they were able to do so, librarians, lacking an immediate incentive, have not been quick to take up the practice. Collecting data on titles not purchased (therefore rejected) could be accomplished rather simply in a virtual environment and would restore the primary analytical tool in amending profiles.

Finally, the idea of a virtual approval plan has some merit, some major drawbacks and a good deal of promise. Discussion and speculation should continue informed by four basic questions:

- Is it cost-effective?
- Is it timely?
- Does it support a viable professional activity?
- Will it be used? 