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Acquisitions Archaeology -- The Inspiration of Unexpected Places (Vol. 3 No. 1, February 1991)

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Acquisitions Archaeology — The Inspiration of Unexpected Places (Vol. 3 No. 1, February 1991)

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I have the exciting task of uncovering discourse wherever it may be. The more unexpected a discovery, the better. On my recent run through *ATG* v.3#1, I found an unlikely point of discursive departure: the postage stamps on the back page.

This particular issue of *ATG* was, curiously enough, addressed and mailed as an individual issue; the usual Bulk Rate U.S. Postage Permit 1057 is covered with stamps. I am not sure how I came to possess this issue, since it was not (originally) mailed to me. But the stamps, mundane as they are, still give me some interesting historical insight. On April 3, 1991, it cost \$1.21 to mail an individual issue of *ATG*. (The cost of first-class postage had recently been increased to 29¢.) Three stamps were used to mail this issue. The first was a \$1 **Johns Hopkins**, designed by **Bradbury Thompson** and issued on June 7, 1989.¹ The second stamp is a 20-cent “Flag Over Supreme Court,” designed by **Dean Ellis** of New York City, and first issued on December 17, 1981.² The final stamp is a 1-cent **Margaret Mitchell**, designed by Texan **Ron Adair** and issued June 30, 1986.³ At 4 and 5/8 oz., it would cost me \$1.56 to mail this same issue today to mail it at the first-class rate and several dollars more than that if I needed to send it as a “priority.” At first the increase doesn’t seem to be that much, perhaps, but that additional 35¢ represents about 29% more than the 1991 postage cost.

While it is certainly intuitive that costs would go up over time, costs do not always go up over time. While I would expect to pay significantly more for postage today than in February 1991, I would expect to pay significantly less for music. In 1991, it would have been reasonable (if not necessarily convenient) to pay \$16 or so for a CD. Today, paying more than \$9.99 for a complete album seems outrageous — assuming, of course, that you are not buying the album one track at a time. In other words, I expect to pay something like 37% less for music.

And while I might write more letters than

the average person, I still come out way ahead today over what my same combined music and stamp purchases would have cost me 19 years ago.

The facile conclusion from this rather brief investigation would be: “Physical things cost more than electronic things; therefore, electronic is cheaper and so it is better.” My hope is that anyone reading this has, like me, gained enough empirical evidence through their own work so that I can skip right to the part where I say definitively that I am *not*, in fact, saying that *at all*.

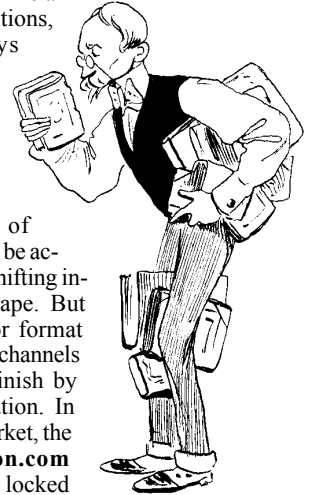
What am I saying then?

First of all, let’s assume that the relative value of my postal service and music collection has stayed constant through time. I get fewer things in the mail, but the important things that I get I still find valuable (and some of those things remain irreplaceable). I have more music and more variety of music than I did, but my interests change through time (limiting my selection at any given point), and I am still limited in the absolute quantity of whatever music I choose (like I have always been). I value both mail and music, and for different reasons. Why, then, would I be willing to pay more for postage if I feel it’s still worth about the same that it was? And why, if my demand has remained relatively constant for music, would the music industry charge me less for the same amount of music?

The answer is not in the intrinsic worth of the content that is being considered but in its *distribution*. The post office must contend with increasing gas prices and decreasing demand for snail mail. The capitalists in the music industry are confronting piracy with laws and technology that simultaneously give just a few major online retailers incredible control over distribution for commercial music...and now, it seems, the exploding mass market for eBooks.

So my conclusion from all this stuff is that things change. When looking at the information marketplace, we’re looking not just at

what information is being produced in what quantity and format, but how that *information-in-a-format* (i.e., “content-object”) is being distributed. Like all things in acquisitions, we have always been concerned with distribution to a degree. But now distribution of content-objects is driven by a proliferation of formats that must be accounted for in a shifting information landscape. But while options for format abound, delivery channels continue to diminish by way of consolidation. In the consumer market, the likes of **Amazon.com** and **iTunes** have locked down a great deal of retail media distribution in terms of both sales and delivery. The impact of such a movement expands convenience through the integration of products, services, and technology while decreasing competition.



The same thing is happening in the library vendor world. The number of vendors continues to diminish. At the same time, the options for distribution from any one vendor continue to grow. With the integration of new formats (such as eBooks) and distribution methods (patron-driven acquisition, print-on-demand services) with “traditional” formats and distribution, there are arguably more options than ever before. The question is really about value. The information in a content-object is (probably) the most important consideration. In some situations, other factors will prevail (such as the “artifactual value” of a rare book). But there is a second question: How is that content object going to be used? It may well be that convenience of distribution (i.e., timeliness and accessibility) is starting to rival the content itself in importance. And if it is the case that distribution is *also* king, then the shift in the marketplace should be no surprise at all. 🍌

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Ages has become a monument. Its overriding preoccupation is self-preservation. It has a vested interest in the status quo. It is just like the Catholic Church before the Reformation. It cannot reform itself because too much is at stake economically and politically. But it held in low regard by the populace at large. That is very dangerous.

The university system is not accountable in the way that every other publicly supported

institutional sector is. As a citizen, I expect all public institutions that are funded by taxes paid by me and my fellow citizens to be held to account for their efficiency — the way they operate and spend money — and their responsiveness to wider economic and societal concern, for instance over skills shortages in the wider economy. And it will not be enough to talk about academic freedom, important though that is. How we deal with the pressures on the idea of the university will define higher education for the next generation. 🍌

Endnotes

1. “1-Dollar Hopkins.” *Arago: People, Postage, and the Post*. National Postal Museum. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian. Accessed at: <http://arago.si.edu/>
2. “Flag Over Supreme Court Issue.” *Arago: People, Postage, and the Post*. National Postal Museum. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian. Accessed at: <http://arago.si.edu/>
3. “1-cent Mitchell.” *Arago: People, Postage, and the Post*. National Postal Museum. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian. Accessed at: <http://arago.si.edu/>