Notes from Mosier-Back to the Future, Part 1

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Anyone who’s been around libraries or in the book trade over the past three decades will have heard the many predictions of the death of the book ad nauseam. I’ve never believed a word of it, and I still don’t. Books offer a tactile satisfaction not readily replaced by much of anything, including eBooks — regardless of whether we’re talking about Web access or the current generation of reader devices.

The book arts are also alive and well. The Oberlin College Libraries are in the process of creating a letterpress studio, and for their 2011 Winter Term, students will produce a book using period equipment. Ed Vermue, Head of Special Collections at Oberlin, reports strong interest in the program. Today’s students are digital natives, to be sure, but their enthusiasm for the world of print would seem to bespeak more than mere curiosity.

For the moment, then, I think it’s safe to say the future of the book looks reasonably secure. What’s less certain is how libraries in general, and academic libraries in particular, will continue to develop collections that include print as well as an ever-expanding range of digital products. What’s pretty clear is that print book sales are in decline in academic libraries, and this trend is only likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

One consequence of this trend has already manifested itself in the ongoing decline of publishers’ print runs, especially academic publishers. Fewer print copies will mean those libraries pursuing a “just in time” approach to collection development will find this strategy less and less successful. Used book sales will be affected, as fewer used books come back onto the market. Moving forward this will translate into ever-grover demand for print on demand. And this, of course, can lead to a discussion of eBooks — but we’ll come back to that shortly.

For the moment, though, I want to stay with print, and to consider new books. Specifically, I want to talk about approval plans.

Although their use has ebbed and flowed a bit over the years, generally reflecting funding levels, approval plans have been used as a primary means of acquiring current-imprint, English language titles by academic libraries in North America, Australia, and Hong Kong. (I’m not going to discuss foreign-language plans in this article — they serve a very important but somewhat different role. Also, I’m not including notification programs in this definition of approval plans — i.e., slips plans or forms plans. For this discussion, an approval plan is an arrangement wherein newly-published books are sent automatically to participating libraries, based on a profile of interests maintained by the vendor. Books judged unsuitable for the collection may be returned without prior authorization.) There are a few mainstream approval plans elsewhere in the world — I set one up a few years ago for the British Library to deliver U.S. and Canadian titles not supplied on deposit — but generally speaking they’re not widely used outside the aforementioned markets.

What’s ebbed far more than flowed, though, in recent years is the number of approval vendors. There aren’t many left, and they serve, inevitably, a declining market. Increasingly libraries have fine-tuned their profiles to receive fewer books, or have gone “virtual” — that is, they ask their vendors to identify what titles would have been supplied as approval books or slips in the past, but make more title-by-title decisions about what actually to have sent. This sustains the discovery value of the profiling mechanism, but dilutes the workflow efficiencies traditional approval plans have offered.

Back in the 1970s and 1980s, when there were more domestic vendors period, and more offering approval plans, vendors sought to differentiate themselves from one another in a couple of major ways. Some endeavored to present themselves as specialists, either by subject or type of publisher — so we had sci-tech vendors, or bookdealers identifying themselves as university press agents. This made sense to vendors in the post-Richard Abel era, when the “not all the eggs in one basket” mantra was invoked by libraries. If you were reasonably sure you couldn’t get all of a library’s business anyway, then why not try to get the most profitable (sci-tech) or readily defined (university press) slice of the pie?

Other vendors aimed to provide as com-
and represented sound scholarship? Nonetheless, there were libraries that used coverage as a criterion for vendor evaluation. This fact influenced vendor behavior.

In fact, one vendor (now long gone, and for reasons at least in part about to become apparent) had a flagship customer who demanded coverage of a very extensive list of publishers. The vendor complied and for years provided slips for thousands of books. However, the library’s expenditures fell every year. After several years the vendor appealed to the library, asking to suspend coverage of publishers the library was not buying (or at least buying from the vendor in question). No one, it turned out, was buying these books from the vendor — they were simply incurring the cost of locating, acquiring, profiling, and stocking books that didn’t sell. The library threatened to drop the vendor if coverage wasn’t sustained. The vendor gave in, for a time — but eventually went out of business.

Approval vendors also developed value-added services which were initially targeted at their core audience, but which in time grew to become much more. In the early 1980s Don Stave, the head of Blackwell North America’s approval program, sought to provide a tool to help customers answer some basic questions: has a given title been published? If not, what’s the expected date of publication? If so, what action, if any, has been taken on behalf of my library (approval book, notification form or slip, standing order)?

The original product, known as the New Book Status Report, was a monthly catalog distributed on microfiche. For free.

NBSR became Blackwell’s New Titles Online, or NTO. NTO was a telnet-accessed, character-based service that enabled libraries to see these same approval-related data, but also additional information — most notably, the Table of Contents. Blackwell attempted to break with the established precedent of free access by charging a nominal annual subscription for the TOC features but met with limited success.

NTO eventually morphed into Blackwell’s Collection Manager, which was expanded to include several firm-order-only features as well as out-of-print (OP) and other records beyond the scope of the approval plan. Yankee’s GOBI, Coutts’ OASIS, and similar vendor offering were brought to market to address the same library expectations and demands. And almost always, for free.

So, fast-forward to 2010. Fewer libraries get books on approval. Fewer libraries get fewer books, period. Do the remaining vendors still endeavor to facilitate some level of comprehensive coverage? Some do, but have changed the game in that they no longer support across-the-board discounts, but instead provide some books at list price and others at list plus a handling charge. Some publishers have been dropped because of low activity.

How long will this gradual shifting of vendor offerings go on? What then is the future of the approval plan? How reasonable is it to expect vendors to continue to invest in systems upgrades, new features, and ongoing support for a service that’s geared to a market segment in decline? Can they sustain this model without substantially revising pricing policies? Will the strategy pursued by some to attempt some delivery of eBooks alongside print prove successful? This presumes the profiling engines can work at least as effectively for e- as for print; probably a given — but put in question by the timing of availability of e-versus print. If e-content continues to be embargoed, what does this mean for efforts at an eBook approval plan? And can this be successful using the current generation of eBook readers or eBook providers, or is some other solution needed?

That’s probably enough for now — we’ll come back to this in my next column. Stay tuned!