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# Acquisitiong Archaeology-Was the CD-ROM DOA?

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that led me to **Berkeley's Library School** where I earned my Master of Library Science. I left **Stanford** in the fall of 1976 for **Boise State University** where I was head of acquisitions and full of ambition and high thoughts about presenting and publishing. I wrote a couple of pieces for *The Idaho Librarian*, but I wanted to be part of the larger stage occupied by prominent names in the profession, many or most of them active in and known to me through the Resources & Technical Services Division (RTSD) of ALA.

Approval plans were still all the rage and **Peter Spyers-Duran**, then at **California State University Long Beach**, had issued a call for papers for the **Fourth International Conference on Approval Plans and Collections [sic] Development: Shaping Library Collections for the 1980s** to be held at the Pfister Hotel in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, October 29-31, 1979. Registration was \$59 for ACRL members, \$89 for non-ACRL members.

The big name speakers were invited, of course, and included **William Axford (University of Oregon)**, **Glyn T. Evans (SUNY)**, **William McGrath (University of Lowell)**, **Paul Mosher (Stanford University)**, **Robert Vosper (UCLA)**, **Kathleen McCullough** and **Edwin Posey (Purdue University)**, **Dora Bibrarz (University of New Mexico)**, and **Richard Chapin (Michigan State University)**.

Judging the contributed papers, my belated thanks to one and all, were **Norman Dudley (UCLA)**, **Hendrik Edelman (Rutgers University)**, **Thomas Mann (California State University Long Beach)**, and **Joseph Nitecki (University of Wisconsin Oshkosh)**.

My paper, titled "An Approval Plan: How It Failed, How It Could Succeed," was among those chosen for the conference. I am certain that **Noreen Aldredge**, **Dimity Burkner**, and **John Kaiser** also presented.

The following booksellers supported the conference (there was a swell bash at the **Milwaukee Natural History Museum** among other informal gatherings during the conference):

- Ambassador Book Service, Inc.**
- The Baker and Taylor Company**
- Ballen Booksellers International, Inc.**
- B.H. Blackwell, Ltd.**
- Blackwell North American, Inc.**
- Casalini Libri**
- Coutts Library Services, Inc.**
- Martinus Nijhoff Booksellers**
- Midwest Library Service**
- Otto Hararassowitz**

Amazingly, most of these booksellers are still in business. There were many others, though, operating then who are no longer with us and those that are are not as flush as they were then and have changed their operations and, for some (all?), their business models in order to survive.

Why all these names? Well, how many of those librarians who participated do you remember? How many have retired or died? When I retire in June, will I be the last of the Mohicans? I resurrect these names to pay tribute to them and have their names in print one more time at least.

This era of large monograph budgets was actually entering a decline, although we didn't know it at the time. The average book price, just a couple of years earlier, was higher than the average periodical price. Check *The Bowker Annual* for the early 1970s if you don't believe me. You could look it up. It is true. But periodicals were beginning their steep and relentless climb and with it, a gradual decline in monographs purchased and a drop in the scope of many approval plans, plans that, I suspect, became more like gathering plans with ever narrower profiles. But is anyone interested? I wrote the first **ARL SPEC Kit** (under the guidance of **Maxine Sitts**) on Approval Plans in **ARL Libraries** in 1981,

and it was revised at least once and maybe twice, but a third time? Why bother? Those days are gone and will never return.

Those really were the good old days, especially if one was an acquisitions librarian as I was. I have always loved buying books and always will but once I retire, I will no longer be able to order on such a large scale as I did then. I don't actually order on that scale now, but I can still spend a lot of money on books for the library if I've a mind to.

Scale is relative. I will have access to three better-than-average second-hand and antiquarian book stores when I retire. There is **Smith Family Books** in Eugene, Oregon (just down the street from the **University of Oregon**) for good reading copies in every field imaginable. And still within walking distance of the university is **J. Michael's Books**, a fine antiquarian shop that also peddles a few new books (as does **Smith Family**). There are other walk-in second-hand shops in Oregon, and I will have the leisure to find them and visit them as I explore parts of the state that I have neglected during the three other times I have lived in that glorious land between California and Washington. Come in the summer and leave your umbrella at home.

A hundred miles northeast in Portland, I can roam and browse the multi-level **Powell's** that sits on the edge of the Pearl District. I have been lost there and have never found an empty table where I might sit with a cup of coffee and thumb through my purchases. I might have better luck on a sunny day.

Yes, I am closing the library door (I may not even get a library card once I am retired), but I am opening the collective book store door in new ways, the ways of a person of leisure (*sans* the wealth that often goes with that title). I will never read all of the books that I already own even if I didn't add to their numbers, but I will buy more and more and more until that last chapter comes to an end. But in the meantime, I will invoke my mantra — "Why borrow a book when you can buy one?" 🌳

## Acquisitions Archaeology — Was the CD-ROM DOA?

Column Editor: **Jesse Holden** (Coordinator of Technical Services, Millersville University) <jesse.holden@millersville.edu>

**A**s I mentioned in my previous column, I am moving away from an "archaeological" project in the strict sense to a "genealogical" project in the general sense. I am starting with the idea of the "compact disc — read-only memory" (how many of you remembered what 'CD-ROM' stands for?) and following it through some past **ATGs**. My method here is casual rather than exhaustive; I will not be evaluating all occurrences of the term or presenting every example that is available. I will be picking out some issues around the CD-ROM and following certain related threads to see what, if anything, our experience with this technology might mean.

The first CD I saw (and heard) was **Bruce Hornsby and the Range's** *The Way It Is*.<sup>1</sup> That was in the summer of 1987. I had just bought the same music on a vinyl LP a few months earlier, and seeing the little silver disc and futuristic player was like magic. Though, looking back, perhaps that moment should not have been so awesome. True, a CD is smaller than a record, and it can

(but usually doesn't) hold more music. The sound is, clearly, better than a cassette. In 1987, the CD seemed like a real revolution: it was small, shiny silver, and, of course, technologically sophisticated (a laser...cool!) — major hallmarks of science fiction. Following on these obvious innovations are what turned out to be, sadly, the stuff of mere urban legend. These radical new discs, I heard repeatedly, could play perfectly even when scratched. They were waterproof. And, best of all, if you watched the spinning disc through the window of the player, you would see fantastic designs that were invisible when the disc was static. (I was honestly told that one particular CD, when spinning at full speed, would generate the image of a squirrel. Needless to say, I did not see a squirrel. And I looked for a long time. The joke's on me, I guess.)

Looking back, the CD was not really so much of a revolution after all. It was like a tiny record, with the exception that (besides being smaller and incorporating a laser) you could have it skip on the player in your car in addition to the player in your living room. It seems

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odd, given its incredible paradigmatic similarity to the spinning discs that came before it, that a future beyond the CD was so hard to prefigure.

Or was it?

In the first issue of *ATG* (dated March 1989), email, hypertext, and the Internet are all featured in various discussions. CD-ROMs, significantly, are not. In a way, I believe that the CD was already superseded — at least in our collective imagination — before it rose to what short-lived prominence it was able to achieve. That said, imagination only counts for so much, and the CD would have to be reckoned with — and in a short time, that reckoning would come.

In November of 1989 — just a few months after it had been completely ignored — the CD was the center of attention. But not necessarily the attention a new information technology would be expected to receive in libraries. In the middle of the issue, **Meta Nissley's** article "CD-ROMs and Acquisitions Issues" headlines the emerging discussion of (and dissatisfaction with) CDs.<sup>2</sup> Featured prominently in a box in the middle of page 21 is a laundry list of concerns, already quite long:

### Current CD-Rom Concerns

- ownership of the data (lease vs. purchase)
- archival copies of superseded material
- preservation of optical discs
- back-up copies of software
- software compatibility for archival versions
  - downloading
  - networking
  - monitoring use
- costs of production
- shortage of real value-added products
- compatibility of hardware and software
- duplication of information available in other formats
- complex and nonstandard licensing agreements
- documentation, training aids, and support services<sup>3</sup>

**Martin Warzala**, too, addresses some concerns about CD-ROMS, especially related to user agreements.<sup>4</sup> These user agreements, he states, are becoming "even more complex, mostly due to the proliferation of CD-ROM and other machine-readable information products available to libraries."<sup>5</sup> In this same issue, licensing is also addressed by **Ron Rietdyk**, who poses one of the Questions of Our Time: "Subscriptions and License Agreements (SLAs): 'Why Are They Here and How Can We Simplify Them?'"<sup>6</sup> CD-ROMs emerge — or burst, rather — on the scene laden with complexity and inflicting a great deal of frustration on everyone who had to deal with them.

On the sideline, we also see the CD-ROM appear as a tool for librarians. In their work, librarians use CDs for the same reason the library users do: they store a lot of information, relatively speaking. **Midwest Library Service** advertises CD-ROMs as part of their MATSS software system, which features "order creation via downloaded MARC records from major bibliographic utilities and CD-ROM databases."<sup>7</sup> (Note that the CD is already secondary to the bibliographic utility.)

The suddenness — not to mention fraught-ness — with which CDs arrive is somewhat shocking. The developing discourse clearly shows that the CD is not necessarily a solution to a problem but often a problem in and of itself. More promising Internet technologies (email, hypertext, networked bibliographic utilities) that will eventually be brought together through the World Wide Web already show far more promise, a promise that seems to predate the rise of CD. The latter, in turn, seems to be a conundrum, a frustration, and an expense that inspires resistance

and begins its own obsolescence at the moment of its ascendancy. The great potential manifested by the CD-ROM — a "vast" (for the time) amount of storage in a compact space — is overshadowed from the outset by a host of other critical issues (technological, intellectual, financial). Unlike the Web, which would burst upon the scene a short time later in the guise of a technological panacea, the CD-ROM seems only to have burst.

Depending on the metaphorical approach you want to use, the CD-ROM was either a wildfire suddenly raging through libraries or something more subtle, insinuating itself into budgets, workflows, and (finally) our collections. So what is the lesson of the CD-ROM? Going forward, my hypothesis is that the great expense in time, money, and intellect devoted to CD-ROMs distracted (perhaps detracted) from an already developing and far more promising technology — the Internet. The very short but well-defined arc traced by the sudden rise and abrupt fall of the CD almost certainly has something to teach us. 🌱

### Endnotes

1. CDs for music and CD-ROMs for data are, technically, not quite the same. According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the standard CD was invented in 1982 and adapted for use in the computer industry as the CD-ROM sometime in the mid-80s. **Wikipedia** indicates, or rather implies, that 1985 was the year of the CD-ROM's official development. For my purposes in this column, however, I will be conflating the two for illustrative purposes.
2. **Meta Nissley**. "CD-ROMs and Acquisitions Issues" *Against the Grain*, v.1#4 (November 1989), p. 21-22.
3. **Nissley**. p. 21.
4. **Martin Warzala**. "If You're Hot You're Hot: Information Product User Agreements" *Against the Grain*, v.1#4 (November 1989), p. 18-19, 38.
5. **Warzala**. p. 19.
6. **Ron Rietdyk**. "Subscriptions and License Agreements (SLAs): 'Why Are They Here and How Can We Simplify Them?'" *Against the Grain*, v.1#4 (November 1989), p. 22.
7. **Midwest Library Service**. "MATSS — The Prefect Software System for Automated Acquisitions." *Against the Grain*, v.1#4 (November 1989), p. 20.

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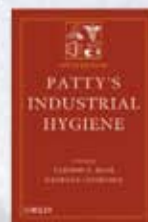
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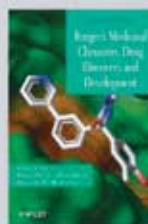
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