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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Steel

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A friend who grew up in Pittsburgh once told me that when she was a girl, her father’s job had to do with putting up the towers that carried electricity to the Monongahela Valley’s steel mills. Years later, when her own career was underway, his job had become to take the towers down.

Sometimes I wonder if my own career might end up going that way. For twenty-five years or so I’ve spent much of my time putting up the approval plans that carried books into academic libraries. But that’s only because they were too busy doing that. In the 1970s, approval review shelves hadn’t disappeared, but now are never the shrines to special book expertise they once were.

Approval plans grew because they were the most efficient way for large libraries to acquire new books. Today, it’s hardly a given anymore that focusing collection development effort on new books is more important than focusing it on books published decades ago (please see a prior column to read why). If one thing about the future of approval plans is sure, though, it’s that whatever form they take will need to continue to offer libraries a more efficient way of doing what they could do on their own—without the help of a vendor. The problem there is “doing what they could do on their own,” since libraries are hardly unammonious as a market, and often not so clear individually either, on what it is they’d want to do in the first place, even if we could reinvent the world tomorrow. But a few things do seem fairly certain.

First, and most obviously, large print-centric approval plans will give way to approval plans where print books and eBooks are both offered up. Profiles will have to integrate the two formats in a way that makes sense, so that print books are favored here, eBooks favored there, acknowledging all the way down the list of subjects that publishing patterns for print and eBooks are different area-by-area, that user attitudes about books are likewise different by area, and that neither publishers nor users are likely to change overnight. Also, acknowledging that the two formats will not always become available simultaneously is a fact of life that won’t be wished or petitioned away anytime soon, but instead will need to be accommodated by profiles that might provide print or might provide an eBook, depending upon library tolerance to wait for the one a selector would prefer to have.

Another safe prediction is the rebirth of the approval review shelf, but this time online. Actually the riskiest part of this forecast is that selectors or administrators would consider regular online inspection of new books the best use of a librarian’s time. Aside from that question, online review functions are in place already, with the available metadata ranging from pretty good to complete online access to a book, and will only get better.

The name of the game in approval plans for vendors and libraries used to be finding ways to minimize returns. An enormous amount of time and energy was poured into painstaking micro-level “fine-tuning” of profiles. Now, thanks to online review, the cost of “returning” an eBook is nil and unwanted print selections can be stopped prior to shipment. Add to that, once again, the growth of shelf-ready profiles and the fact that title-by-title selection isn’t valued as it was in the old days. We are nearly at the point where the cycle of vendor presen-
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I am revisiting the same issue that I looked at last time for two reasons. The first is that one ad, in particular, caught my attention when I read through this issue the first time. The second is that I want to provide a demonstration of how one may excavate multiple coherent discursive formations from the same “provisional, visible grouping” of statements—a grouping that may be thought of archaeologically as a stratum. Indeed, within the February 1990 issue of ATG, there are many things being discussed within our professional discourse many different ways. One such discursive formation that I discussed previously emerged from the anxiety about how the value of journal publications could be evaluated and communicated within the library community. At the same time, another discursive formation was developing around the possibilities and promise of technology.

In the short time that I have been working on my archaeological investigations here, I have found (given the relatively recent time period I’m working with, archaeologically speaking) that change can be measured effectively on at least two scales: music and technology. In February 1990, for example, Midnight Oil’s Blue Sky Mining was released, which helps put things in personal, if not geologic, perspective. (I wore out my Blue Sky Mining cassette long ago.) Looking at changes in technology over the past twenty years is also instructive; change has been so rapid over the past two decades that investigating a discursive formation about technology allows us to situate a given set of circumstances—and related statements about the technology and circumstances—in a fairly specific context.

One technology in particular helps determine the discursive framework for how technology in libraries was being discussed at the beginning of 1990. What started my thinking in this direction was an ad from Readmore that ran on page 24. Unfortunately, our present-day copyright labyrinth confounds the reproduction of the ad within the context of this article, but I will try to convey the visual gestalt that hit me when I first saw this ad. The ad is for a Readmore product called “Remo” (whose etymology should be obvious), and the top half of the ad is space dedicated to the bold promise to: “REDUCE YOUR SERIALS MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS.” Such a promise remains compelling even to my twenty-first century eyes, and it is precisely that ability to relate to such a statement at the present time that makes the rest of the ad all the more interesting.

Just under this large declaration, off to the side of the page, is a small hand-drawn image of a floppy disk. As we have all become aware, technology is most captivating when it’s small. My iPod Shuffle — the size of a money clip—still impresses me every time I look at it. “Wow,” I think, “so much technology in such a small space.” Readmore was onto the same idea: the big sell for the Remo product is a powerful but understated technology. Indeed, the text of the ad suggests that you will be solving your serials management problems with just “a few square inches of counter space.”

And how? With “the first microcomputer-based software package” that “handles the full range of serials management functions.”

You could even use Remo in a “network configuration.” Wow — so much technology in such a small space!

And yet, I find that I am unconsciously reading “electronic journals” for “serials.” It is strange to think about the dawn of computer-based journals management and the promise that such a giant leap seemed to hold. Readmore is presenting a still-new solution for managing print serials, and are—by their own claim—the first to do it by way of desktop computing. And if you happened to be worried about using the technology, don’t worry — “in the event of questions, an answer is only a phone call away on our toll-free hotline.”

What?! More than anything, the reassurance of the advertised toll-free hotline instead of the now-ubiquitous URL jars me out of the present.

Flash forward almost twenty years to November 2009. An ad was run by Swets for the eSource Manager. (As an aside, Swets is the company that may or may not hold the copyright — by way of the Blackwell Periodicals Division — to the Remo ad that I am not reproducing in this article.) The Swets ad is (either by design or by coincidence) strikingly similar to the Remo ad structurally, though it is not at all the same.

The header of the Swets ad reads: “Master your electronic resources.” Clearly this statement is similar to Readmore’s statement. In Swets’ case, though, it is the promise (and problem) that is understated. The graphic here is now in color! — gets full prominence: a stylized Rubik’s cube that conveys, above all else, multidimensionality. So instead of a two dimensional disk showing the smallness of technology, an image of a large 3-D puzzle suggests ordered complexity, as well as the growing importance of images.

The text for the eSource Manager ad is, like the Readmore ad, focused and concise. However, this is where the true difference lies: Remo was about tracking physical pieces to ensure access. The four bullet points of the Swets ad are all about licensing, including tracking “license conditions” while providing an “overview of all digital rights.” And licensing, more often than not, implies limits on access. Leaving aside the larger and certainly more controversial issue of whether the restrictions set forth in licenses need be either as explicit or complex as they frequently are, we can observe a shift not in structure but in function of managing resources. The shift is three-fold. First, it is a shift in information environment, where we can say that more information is potentially accessible today than in February 1990. It is also a shift in information technology, where electronically-disseminated resources are perhaps more vulnerable to unacceptable (or at least unexpected) uses. Finally, it is a shift in information strategy. Not a shift continued on page 77

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component, science and engineering, in favor of eBook packages bought directly from a large publisher.

The approval plan blast furnace has already begun to cool, and it’s time for libraries, and vendors themselves too, to acknowledge that fewer libraries are going to need us to keep on acting like U.S. Steel turning out the ingots. Instead, we need to be like mini-mills, companies more flexible, efficient, and innovative than the big steelmakers that put out of business. Unfortunately, book vendors have means that resemble those of the mini-mills, while the U.S. Steels of our work, in terms of means, are companies like Amazon, or like the eBook publishers big enough to sell direct to libraries in a big way. And of course the U.S. Steel comparison hardly does justice to Google. Who knows what Google will be permitted to do and will choose to do in the way of bookselling? In case that’s not enough uncertainty, let’s add that book vendors will need to re-tool under library budget conditions more unstable than ever.

We all have assumptions based on what’s worked in the past. So did the steel industry.

What’s needed now are companies who know enough about libraries to help them build local environments — comprised of customized services, databases, interfaces — where eBooks and print books both get their due, as do old books and new books, where the titles most likely to be used can be acquired with little effort, sometimes automatically and sometimes not, and where selectors might be anyone in the campus community.

Does that sound like a job for U.S. Steel?