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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Steel

Column Editor: **Bob Nardini** (Group Director, Client Integration and Head Bibliographer, Coutts Information Services) <bnardini@couttsinfo.com>



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 looking 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. Not that I think these libraries will go the way of Pittsburgh's steel mills. But it's clear that something sooner or later will need to give in bookselling.

Pittsburgh's steelworkers lost most of their remaining mill jobs within a span of about five years in the 1980s, when a long postwar decline in the steel industry turned into free-fall. Things went wrong for steel because companies trusted assumptions from the industry's past. Demand would grow, business structures were sound, competition was no worry. Then plastics and ceramics replaced steel in industry after industry. Enormous companies proved muscle-bound, and newer, nimbler companies at home and overseas took much of the steel market that was left.

Success is a trap in any industry. Even in a tiny industry as compared to steel — or to most anything — such as library bookselling. For us the approval plan, like huge open-hearth furnaces were for steelmakers before more efficient furnaces turned Pittsburgh's cold, has for decades been the forge generating the heat to fuel our business. Now we watch as the library world around us clearly will not for much longer keep building collections structured around the heavy steel of monographs by the carton delivered by the week. Like steelmakers, book vendors can't just turn off the furnace and ask customers to hold on please while we retool. And certainly not to hold on please while we try to imagine what our new furnace will look like. For now our steel is still in demand, because so far libraries haven't retooled either.

It's been a long time since the "approval" in approval plan has been at the center of the whole idea, when the high status of book selection and book selectors was visibly institutionalized and paid tribute at the approval review shelf. There, at considerable expense, library staff would mount a rotating presentation of weekly new books arranged in special order for inspection and blessing (or not) by selectors. Some libraries brought in comfortable seats and made a kind of lounge out of this space. I remember one library where, in a past life for me, the review area was called "Yankee Stadium."

Then a lot of selectors stopped coming. Sometimes because they were too busy doing other things that had come to seem more important than book selection. Sometimes because library administration had invited them to

stay away, instead bringing in a "shelf-ready" arrangement where the books arrived labeled and stamped. Approval review shelves haven'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 unanimous 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-

tation and library inspection has been entirely de-ritualized, and an approval "return" is an unusual event.

And speaking of pains-taking ritual, it would be hard to top the way approval plan profiles have traditionally been written. No need to recap here (please again see a prior column, sorry), other than to say that most of that enterprise should move right to online — where it already has to some degree — so that librarians could at least draft a profile on their own, with help available from a remote vendor specialist, using test data to look at the likely results of different possibilities. Then the onsite library ceremony, which might last a day or two instead of the longer sessions now common at the launch of a new approval plan, would be more like a ribbon cutting than a High Mass, with the prime object being to tidy up detail prior to mutual congratulation.

While the profile has always been at the ceremonial center of these arrangements, it's been many years since a profile alone has been what was needed to enable a library to buy books on a large scale from a vendor, which of course is the whole idea. Elaborate technical service arrangements between book vendor and library have long been a fact of life, as back-room functions were outsourced by one library after another. For just about as long, vendor databases tied intricately to these arrangements have been workaday acquisitions and collection development tools for librarians.

Now libraries are asking vendors to develop interfaces and processes to enable their patrons to select books — probably the hottest trend in our business at the moment — with the approval plan profile sometimes at the center of these efforts. Those up on their library history will spot a little irony here, since in effect libraries want to give back some part of a prize hard won across a couple of decades or so from the late sixties forward, when authority for book selection was wrestled away from the teaching faculty, often by the introduction of what was then a new way to acquire books, the approval plan.

Technical services, bibliographic databases, new selection interfaces, things like these take a lot of money to develop. The money comes from selling books, against margins modest to begin with and now eroded for years. Book vendors — the remaining ones, that is — point this out from time to time. Approval plans were never cheap to run in the first place. Instead, they've required all sorts of handwork by skilled staff in the office and in the field. Today not only are libraries buying fewer books, but some of the sales with the best margins have evaporated, as many libraries swap out the vendor's most profitable approval plan

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Acquisitions Archaeology — Managing Resources (Vol. 2 No. 1, February 1990)

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

I am revisiting the same issue that I looked at last time¹ 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 statements² — 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 24.³ Unfortunately, our present-day copyright labyrinth confounds the reproduction of the ad within the context of this article,⁴ 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 micro-computer-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-novel 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.⁵

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 — 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

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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 few 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 they put out of business. Unfortunately, book vendors have means that resemble those of the mini-mills, while the **U.S. Steels** of our world, 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**? 🐘