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From A University Press-Publishers and Consortia

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In my last column, I addressed the confusing and sometimes dizzying array of options for purchasing, licensing, or even briefly renting scholarly content in electronic form. We, both libraries and publishers, find ourselves in this place because we are in the process of navigating significant change in how users would like to access and interact with content. We experiment, each of us, as we try to develop a sense of what users want and what is truly useful to them, and also to begin to gather some data. As the landscape is constantly evolving, in addition to dealing with whatever new model I’m working to get put into place, I also like to speculate a bit about what comes next — and what that may mean for us as publishers.

Now that PDA/DDA seems to be a more accepted part of the libraries’ acquisitions portfolio, in the last year or so my thoughts have turned to the issue of consortia. In an era when most of us have to do more with less, the concept of consortial purchase or access makes sense. Consortia existed long before the advent of eBooks, but consortial purchases in print meant that books were being shipped or sent by van to multiple campuses and libraries across a wide geographic area. Libraries saved on purchasing multiple copies, but there are real costs to the processing and transport of the materials. (In the conversation three years ago that turned me around on the concept of short term loan/access, a librarian explained to me the inefficiencies and costs of interlibrary loans.) The eBook, however, changes this game entirely.

With electronic content, there’s nothing to transport, nothing to photocopy or scan. The eBook arrives immediately usable in any of the consortia locations (that is, according to the publisher and vendor agreement about the scope of use of the material, but more about that in a moment). It takes us one step closer to the dream of those who champion the vision of one big universal library on a set of servers somewhere (this would be the dream of my brother, network architect for a state flagship university. So far at least, no fights of my brother, network architect for a state have broken out over the Thanksgiving turkey flag. So far at least, no fights of my brother, network architect for a state — or have not chosen to purchase university press content. These are users to be exposed to our scholarly publications, with the hope that they will find them useful and germane to their work and study. Once these publications are discoverable and discovered, the assumption is that overall use will increase and that a convincing argument can be made for the real (read: higher) value of the content. Smith argues that large end-user populations and great quantities of material “is the best combination for driving access, usage, and value long-term.” How to solve the accompanying pricing dilemma? Smith puts it well when he notes, “You need to start somewhere and build both end-user and library loyalty. You also need to take a long term view in these challenging economic times.”

As the proverb goes, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Nervous as many publishers are, and as unsure as they are about what measure of financial return will actually define sustainability, some single steps have begun. Zeoli says that nearly all of the consortial deals he’s working with for book content are limited to one year and are all classified as pilot programs. In the pilots, there are usually limitations on simultaneous access, sometimes the requirement to purchase print copies, and/or other stipulations that publishers hope will stem the erosion of print sales or at least protect them to some degree from losing additional revenue. I suspect that neither side would say these pilots are ideal, but they are at least a start. The libraries might argue that for the lower price per book, publishers are getting use (though exposure and access) where there would otherwise be return, the publishers might say that their content gets higher use in electronic form than print (because of the increased ease of access and navigation) and so the electronic material should carry a higher unit price.

“The devil is in the details of what we do,” Zeoli says. “Everything is an experiment.” Zeoli is right about the details. Gone are the days when we (either libraries or publishers) could operate with only the vaguest notion of what our partners do and of the nature of their operations and finances. To even begin to structure an experiment, we each have to have a solid understanding of our partners’ end goals, as well as the pain points they experience. As with so many other things in how we conduct our work as libraries and publishers, it is the experiments that will eventually show us what does and doesn’t work for us, what provides value (defined many ways), and what ultimately proves unsustainable. The first step may be a moderately frightening one, but without it, there is no journey forward.