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The Scholarly Publishing Scene-Sci-Tech Book Publishing Days

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The Scholarly Publishing Scene — Sci-Tech Book Publishing Days

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It was half-a-dozen years ago, give or take a year or two. A small group of us gray-haired publishing types, who’d spent much of our working lives publishing scholarly and reference books, were standing and talking in the back of one of the public rooms in a Washington, DC hotel. A session at the PSP Annual Conference had just ended. It had been worthwhile, we conceded, but we wartered on about the session’s focus — on some aspect of journal publishing. We shared our observation that pretty much the entire conference had been devoted to journals. Next year, we agreed, we wanted books to be part of the discussion.

Let me be fair. The decision by any STM/scholarly publishing conference planners to focus mainly, if not exclusively, on journals, and to give books short shrift needs no special pleading. Commercial publishers’ subscription prices are a major source of friction between publishers and researchers, librarians, and whoever else seeseth at the profit margins generated by journals containing results of research paid for by government agencies. Everyone in all precincts of the sci-tech universe can’t stop arguing about this — and about the rise of the open access movement that resulted from it.

Nevertheless, sci-tech books do live on, even though the glory days were long, long ago. Fifty years ago, for example, Wiley — a major force in journals now, but a publisher of college textbooks and sci-tech monographs and a few handbooks back then — felt it could safely ignore journals. Legend (maybe urban legend) has it that in 1962, when Wiley merged with Interscience — or acquired it, depending on your perspective — a dozen or so journals, including the prize polymer titles edited by the venerable Herman Mark, came into the deal from Interscience. Wiley brass, I’ve been told, didn’t know what to do with these non-book properties and contemplated selling them off.

They didn’t sell any of the journals, but did keep them and books in separate departments, which was still the case when I came to Wiley as an acquisitions editor for professional-level engineering books in the mid-1970s. Back then Wiley’s journals department was very profitable, but I didn’t get the sense that there was any pressure to add new titles. I don’t remember anyone getting terribly exercised about that.

The book business, on the other hand, was expected to grow. That’s why they’d hired me as the third engineering editor. More titles — that was an obvious path to growth. I’d been an engineer and a freelance writer before taking the Wiley job. My connection to the company had been an engineering book of my own that they published in the late ’60s. I could publish an author put a book together and I figured out how to build a list. (My mechanical engineering titles from the ’70s remained the foundation of the Wiley ME list for decades.)

But let’s face it I didn’t know squat about sci-tech book publishing. It was from water-cooler-type grousing that I learned, for example, that one of Wiley’s great chemistry book series, Fiesers’ Reagents for Organic Synthesis, was selling fewer and fewer units as successive volumes came out over the years — something like 6,000 to 3,000 to half that in succeeding decades, if my memory isn’t betraying me. In order to keep revenues going up, you would raise prices, and Wiley had, of course — it wasn’t running a charity, I need hardly say. So although I don’t remember the exact content of the conversations I had with my original Wiley boss, the great Bob Polhemus, we must have discussed ways my hamster self could grow my publishing program while cranking out twenty-plus new and revised titles every year.

I figured it all out well enough that I eventually wound up running all of Wiley’s sci-tech publishing, both books and journals, until I left in early 1990 and founded a consulting business, which evolved into my present situation where I edit engineering handbooks under my own name for three publishers — Wiley, McGraw-Hill, and Elsevier. There are some twenty titles, half a dozen in revised editions, some revisions and one new title in multi-volume editions. My standard practice is to think up a topic, do a proposal, and submit it to one of the three publishers. To this point, I haven’t had much problem getting one or the other of them to give me a contract and a modest advance against future royalties. (Grants, which don’t count against future royalties, are now pretty much out of the question, alas.) And it can be a long slog, but I do manage to recruit fairly sizable contributors from both academia and industry to submit fairly sizable chapters for any handbook project I undertake.

So my publishers and contributors do seem to still have faith in sci-tech book publishing’s future, even though everyone seems aware of the challenges, which are far more daunting than those of thirty or forty years ago. Back in that pre-Internet era, you had to worry about photocopies or pirated physical-copy editions. It took time, effort, and money to rip off publishers. I don’t even recall anyone saying “information wants to be free” until the Internet made it much easier to liberate copyrighted material from the grasp of the copyright holder.

Of course, there were free publications back in the day that competed with publishers’ offerings. One of my favorites when I was a working engineer was a two-inch-thick plastics properties book that Pre-Jack-Welch-GE happily gave away to promote both the plastics it manufactured. (They’ve since sold off that business, I believe.) More competition came from engineers’ cutting pages out of technical magazines, many of which were advertising supported and free to subscribers, and putting the pages into filing cabinets in their offices.

Seems quaint, doesn’t it? Nowadays, I’m pretty sure, the first thing engineers do when they’re searching for technical information is surf the Web. It’s the biggest filing cabinet there ever was, of course. And most of the information is free. It hasn’t even been ripped off from some publisher. And do librarians still try to ward people off Wikipedia? My guess is that many practitioners believe that what’s in there is good enough and no one could convince them otherwise.

Some people in sci-tech publishing even loathe Amazon. One reason, according to one editor I spoke with recently, is that Amazon has knocked out of the book distribution business such middlemen as technical societies and equipment manufacturers who used to sell books in their fields to their members and customers. The trouble is that Amazon doesn’t have the membership and customer lists and doesn’t reach as many potential book buyers as the old middlemen used to. So fewer copies get sold.

But, hey, it’s not all doom and gloom. A sci-tech publisher may debate whether to publish more books or fewer books over the next fiscal year or two, or whether to focus on specialized monographs or big contributed books. It depends on the discipline, of course, as one editor reminded me recently. And, as an upper-level manager pointed out, legacy counts for a great deal, and new ebook, print-on-demand, and Web-based multi-functionality platforms provide sci-tech publishers with lots of freedom to keep their monograph or handbook programs alive.

So monograph publishers can survive by going eBook and print-on-demand, possibly after a short initial printing used to fill backorders. And a publisher with a strong contributed-book presence, e.g., handbooks and encyclopedias, will rely increasingly on customers’ adopting such platforms as McGraw-Hill’s AccessEngineering. That’s why Elsevier, with a large book program, when you take into account their Academic Press titles, bought Knovel, which reaches a primarily engineering audience in both academia and industry.

As electronic distribution of sci-tech books becomes increasingly important (it’s trending slowly — 10 to 20% for engineering books now, although approaching 40% for professional computing books, at one major publisher), the question I have is whether revenues, and therefore author royalties, will hold up. One problem, in my view, has to do with the bundling of multiple publications that publishers provide in response to what the market demands. It’s a reasonable thing to do, but it can result in loss of page views, and therefore revenues, if customers demand one title or the other, that they hear their customers demanding — or to entice continued on page 57
are changing in collection development. I suspect that the same is true for other areas. For my collection development course, I ask students to read articles on “eBooks,” “publishing,” “print-on-demand,” and “electronic publishing” in Wikipedia. I didn’t find any scholarly articles that were current enough and offered broad enough coverage of these topics. I ask students for feedback on using Wikipedia for assigned readings. Some are surprised after the negative comments from other professors. While the quality of the articles varies, I tell students that they are more current, offer multiple perspectives, and give links to more scholarly resources. I conclude by saying that they should be savvy enough information seekers to overcome any of the weaknesses traditionally assigned to Wikipedia.

To conclude, I would suggest to libraries that they give up on steering students away from Google, Wikipedia, and similar online resources. Instead, they should show them how to use these resources as entry points into the formal scholarly communication network. One of my students pointed out a few weeks ago that she uses Wikipedia to get an overview of legal topics before reading the specialized articles that most often assume this basic understanding. Instead of losing the battle against using these resources, librarians should co-opt them by showing what they do and don’t do well and how they can be exceptionally useful at the start of the information gathering process.

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two races is perfectly described in this 20-page short story. Nancy’s stream of consciousness (a style Faulkner used in his writing), the dialogue between the children, parents, and other laborers in the home, and the simple focus on fear lead us into the emotional and Gothic world of a society that is very reticent (or not) to come to terms with its fate.

“'When yawl go home, I gone,' Nancy said. She talked quieter now, and her face looked quiet, like her hands. ‘Anyway, I got my coffin money saved up with Mr. Lovelady.’ Mr. Lovelady was a short, dirty man who collected the Negro insurance, coming around to the cabins or the kitchens every Saturday morning, to collect fifteen cents... We went up out of the ditch. We could still see Nancy’s house and the open door, but we couldn’t see Nancy now, sitting before the fire with the door open, because she was tired. ‘I just done got tired,’ she said. ‘I just a (n-word). It ain’t no fault of mine.’”

And with that we might understand why Flannery O’Connor, stated that “the presence alone of Faulkner in our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do. Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down.”