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Electronic Information

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Bit by Bit

by Joyce Ogburn (Yale University)
ARE YOU PLUGGED IN?

ELECTRONIC INFORMATION

Do you attend conferences on electronic resources, electronic communication, computers in society, or the future of publishing? If so, do you receive institutional support? Do your colleagues involve you in planning for collecting electronic information in the library? Are you always informed when someone outside of acquisitions has acquired a CD-ROM "on trial"? If you are an acquisitions librarian and were able to answer yes to several of these questions, you are probably among the minority. These questions address the nature of acquisitions and its relation to the shifting patterns in communication and publishing. Although acquisitions professionals may want to be considered the experts on publishing, knowledge of the changing nature of what we acquire may be viewed as extraneous to the acquisitions function or its management. This knowledge is largely seen to be the domain of collection development, systems, and public services personnel, who are selecting and servicing the resources. The missing element in this scenario is the person who has the knowledge for acquiring the material and monitoring the avenues of supply for electronic media. Acquisitions as a function is charged with delivering materials into the library. It may be assumed that traditional methods and vendors are all that acquisitions librarians need to know and that ALA, Charleston, or NASIG may be the only conferences we should attend. However, to manage effectively we must be on the forefront of knowledge of the electronic publishing industry, which may mean sitting on planning committees, reading literature, and attending conferences other

that the traditional "acquisitions" conference. Convincing our colleagues and administrators of this is another story. Why does acquisitions need this knowledge? Because in some cases the publisher of electronic resources may be the only source of acquisition, but this is not always true. Who is exploring alternative sources? What if the only supplier

pursues unethical or questionable business practices? Who is establishing business relations, setting up accounts, negotiating terms, and evaluating their services? Who is monitoring the legal implications of acquiring new formats? Who is evaluating the real cost of acquiring electronic resources? IS IT YOU? SHOULDN'T IT BE? As if we have enough to do, you ask, now we have to read about electronic publishing, know hardware advances, the latest systems, and all the possible vendors. Well, if your institution is or is likely to acquire this stuff, then you'd better know all of this. But more to the point, administrators don't always understand what role you as a professional should play in the electronic arena. Even if you have told them, they may not know how to listen. That is why it is important to ask if anyone is getting support to gain this valuable knowledge.

"Who is establishing business relations, setting up accounts, negotiating terms, and evaluating their services? Who is monitoring the legal implications of acquiring new formats? Who is evaluating the real cost of acquiring electronic resources?"

But the primary source of this problem is the perception of acquisi-

tions as a reactive organization, rather than as a proactive one. In this perception, acquisitions simply takes "orders" (no pun intended) from others who are building the collections. Acquisitions librarians then have no need to know about electronic resources and publishing because someone else will take care of that knowledge. On the contrary, we should be proactive in investigating any new publishing medium and method, in understanding the implications for acquiring the stuff, and in advising others on the impact of collecting new media. Examination of this one small part of our responsibilities enlightens the discussion of our professionalism and the role of acquisitions in the library. If we lay claim to a special knowledge that includes publishing practices and trends, then as professionals we are obligated to follow developments in electronic communication. If our role also includes interacting with publishers and attempting to influence their practices, then we MUST push into the avenues of influence, interact with the players, and translate the experience into better acquisitions service. Furthermore, we are compelled as professionals to try to shape the future, to anticipate and adapt to new technologies, and to plan for and be responsive to new needs. Fortunately, acquisitions related conferences like the Charleston Conference and NASIG are recruiting intelligent and informed speakers in the area of electronic publishing and communication. But is this enough? Let's find where to plug in, and then turn on the switch to start the enlightenment!