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Twelve Red Herrings

by Albert Henderson (Consultant)

To those of us who remember when publishers and librarians were partners in service of science and scholarship, many of the remarks recorded in *Against the Grain* and elsewhere come as surprises. It seems to me that many of the issues that divide the interests of the research community are false and that the divisiveness is damaging. The answer to the end of the serials crisis lies in stable, adequate funding, not electronics — which requires new funding that might better be spent on essentials during hard times. While I don't understand the motives behind them, I can enumerate some of the major red herrings and tell you why I think they mislead and lack substance.

NUMBER 1: Cost-effectiveness evaluation based on dividing a subscription price by numbers of words and/or citations is valid.

If anyone proposed to compare Beethoven with Brahms by dividing a ticket price by the number of musical notes, etc., they would be laughed out of the concert hall. If they tried evaluating the painting of Picasso versus Jackson Pollack, by the pounds of oil on canvas, they would be laughed out of every museum and gallery. When Gordon & Breach sued American Institute of Physics, *et al.*, the German court dismissed the complaint on the basis that no German would take such comparisons seriously. I believe the judge's comment was

that only Americans could possibly be so naive.

NUMBER 2: The profits of commercial publishers are enormous.

Well, come on and get into the business. You too can be rich. Hire me to show you how to research markets and employ the most modern technology (what I do as a consultant!). It's a free country. To those who cite the Pergamon annual report of the 1980's, I would refer the Price Waterhouse report of the early 1970s which showed all of Pergamon's profits to be tied up in slow-moving inventory and accounts receivable. It can be profitable, but it's not simple, risk-free, or easy.

NUMBER 3: Libraries can negotiate prices with publishers as if science journals were commodities.

You can try. However if you cancel *Beilstein* and it can't be found locally, your teaching and academic chemistry faculty will probably want to cancel you. You can be replaced, but there is no real substitute for *Beilstein* or any other science journal. On-line abstracts and interlibrary loans will just not do.

NUMBER 4: Interlibrary loan is a substitute for a subscription.

Perhaps it is for a student or a research assistant using a bibliography or on-line reference source. For the innovative mind capable of advancing the frontiers of technology through insight and inspiration, forget it. Libraries with stacks within walls are essential. Bigger is better. The institution without a well-developed up-to-date library will eventually lose its first-rate people and then no longer qualify for those million-dollar grants. Much of the Nobel-prize winning innovations have already shifted out of the U.S. according to AAAS past-president Leon Lederman, paralleling the problems in

library and other research funding.

NUMBER 5: There are 40,000 to 70,000 science journals.

Maybe, but only 4,000 or so provide the essential primary research reports and authoritative reviews necessary to the research community. The balance are ephemeral newsletters, digests, house organs, throwaways, etc. It takes very little to get listed in *Ulrich's*.

NUMBER 6: There is an "explosion" of science journals.

In the 1960s, Yale's Derek de Solla Price documented a 5% annual increase beginning in the mid-17th century. The rate of growth hasn't changed in nearly 340 years. Why should it change now?

NUMBER 7: The difference between increases in the Consumer Price Index and price indexes for science periodicals is a puzzle (code for 'publisher's profiteering').

Actually the average annual increase for science journals between 1977 and 1990 recorded by *Library Journal* was 12.12% while the CPI rose an average of 6.10%. If you add the 5% annual increase in pages (see 6, above) you will nearly balance out. The additional 1.02% can be posted to deficiencies in the sample and the cost of new information technology (fax, computer, courier, e-mail, etc.) not covered by the CPI market basket of consumer goods and services. Several studies of science journal prices have shown increases to be justified by increases in output, and inflation. Aren't these studies read?

NUMBER 8: Journal editors are responsible critics of other journals.

Since when has human nature changed? Claims to have rejected papers that appear later in other journals seem to imply that "my journal is

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better" than the others. Yet such comments are issued without a clue as to which papers were rejected and whether the journals that later accepted them were comparable in readership, scope and aim. In my opinion, the reporters that publish such crap got trained at *The Enquirer*.

NUMBER 9: Studies of journal use in the library are reliable indicators of value.

I haven't read one study based on a methodology worth two cents. How can any responsible librarian compare the use of *Life* magazine by an undergraduate vs. a senior scientist browsing the back volumes of *Zeitschrift fur Physik* (and reshelving them)? Donald King published an extensive study of journals use in 1981 and provided additional information to the Librarian of Congress who published it along with other testimony. Refinements of such studies are needed. Read King before starting a use study, or call me and I'll help you design it. Almost as

bad as the use studies are evaluations based on misunderstandings of journal citation impact reports.

NUMBER 10: Association publications are less expensive than commercial publications.

Well, not if you compare comparables. If you compare the specialized with the omnibus, you will find *Acta Crystallographica* to be more pricey than *Physical Review* (both published by associations) based on dollars per kiloword — unless you are a crystallographer, in which case the few papers of interest in *Physical Review* seem excessively expensive. On the other hand, if you compare the translation journals published by AIP and Plenum you will find little difference.

NUMBER 11: All research should be published by non-commercial organizations.

It once was. In the beginning, there was one non-commercial publisher. The trouble with non-commercial or-

ganizations is that they are sometimes controlled by editors who choose to restrict new ideas rather than bankroll them. Enter the promoters and entrepreneurs. Bless them or we would still be in the Middle Ages.

NUMBER 12: Publishers who publish studies comparing their journals with other publications offer fair and balanced evaluations.

Since when has human nature changed? Would any of these guys let a manufacturer of instruments get away with such blatant promotion? I can't help but see a conflict of interest when it is so abundantly obvious and label such articles "advertising." Accept only studies where the authors have no interest in their conclusions.

Albert Henderson writes frequently on problems between libraries and publishers. He can be reached at: 2423 Noble Station; Bridgeport, CT 06608; 203-367-1555 msgs.; 203-380-1703 fax; 203-380-0021 direct. ☛