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Issues in Vendor-Library Relations

Electronic Publishing: Beyond Pricing

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Electronic Publishing: Beyond Pricing

by Barry Fast

Electronic publishers are experimenting with a variety of pricing models in order to find a reasonable, profitable and fair policy. Over time they will succeed; the market will decide. In a year or two one or more pricing policies will be in effect that satisfy most consumers most of the time.

There is another aspect of this evolving policy that is not being discussed enough, and in some ways it is much more difficult to resolve. While the market as a whole will determine pricing, the potential conflict between government investigations and the right to privacy may only be resolved, if at all, by a few influential people. It is time for more of us to get involved in the debate.

Here is the problem as I see it. Most libraries, most universities and other research institutions have a policy in place regarding investigations by the government. When the police ask what journals a researcher used in a library, the common policy is not to divulge this information. Libraries have long held that people do their research in private, and the particular journals or books used by a researcher are incorporated in that privacy right. But two elements in this widely shared ethic are changing: The nature of the information itself, which is transforming to an electronic format, and the seemingly new specter of widespread hate groups, united in an apparent contempt for our democracy.

If, as seems likely, the pricing of electronic journals is tied in some way to usage, then the ability to track who is using a particular journal, how often, and even which parts becomes simply a matter of programming. If libraries are paying publishers based on frequency of use, it is just a small step to recording who is using each journal. In fact, that may well be the most efficient and

effective way of tracking usage for purposes of pricing. And it has some real advantages, both to publishers and libraries. Publishers can see which types of researchers are using their journals, how frequently, and which parts of each journal are being consulted. This can help them in editing existing journals to better serve the needs of users, and develop new journals based on emerging trends in usage. Similarly, libraries will be able to determine which journals are really being used, and which are not. They can do better resource sharing and better managing of their electronic journal budget. The danger here is that government investigators will have an easy electronic trail to follow.

By refusing to divulge who is looking at what, even in an electronic environment, librarians will continue to keep the wall of privacy around people's reading habits. It is unlikely that this tradition of privacy will be breached just because the information is in a new format. It is disturbing, however, to watch our supposedly liberal government (in the human rights sense) falling all over themselves to get to the right on the issue of hate groups. From Janet Reno's instant promise of the death penalty for the Oklahoma City bombers, before she even knew anything about them or their motives, to Bill Clinton's sweeping condemnation of "hate radio," our leaders are demonstrating that the voice of reason is merely a whisper. It is the times, perhaps, or maybe it is just that they have no courage to go against the mob psychology of vengeance and fear. In this atmosphere, with this lack of leadership, a new kind of McCarthyism is not far fetched. After all, the Alien and Sedition Acts were passed in the earliest days of this republic, under the halcyon days of Jeffersonian Democracy. It does not take much to change the public mood from tolerance and fair play to fear, anger and ven-

geance. When the government calls for more government investigative powers it is time to start worrying. This appears to be the national mood now, and we should do our small part to work against it.

Librarians have traditionally defended the whole concept of freedom to read, even in the worst of situations, in small towns where it takes great courage to stand up against one's neighbors. There is no reason to believe that librarians will suddenly change now. The policies of keeping research private, to hold sacred an individual's right to read without prejudice, is not in danger. But will this hold true for the publishers?

Publishers are businesses, and as such are vulnerable to government pressure. Some publishers do not agree with the right to privacy, or at least not to the extent incorporated into the policies of most universities. It is more likely that the information electronic publishers have — about who is reading what — will be turned over to the police. While librarians may defend a principle, even at some risk, electronic publishers would seem to be much less motivated to do so.

In order to help electronic publishers join librarians in the principle of privacy, librarians should consider writing into their electronic journal usage contracts that they will hold publishers to the same high standards that their institution maintains. Publishers should promise that they will not divulge any information on who is using which journals or articles to investigative agencies. If publishers are contractually bound to adhere to this standard, they will find it much easier to resist any heavy-handed tactics from a government more interested in playing to the mob than protecting our rights.

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portant an issue when libraries decide whether to continue to go direct or work with a jobber.

A library's decision to use jobbers when ordering non-print materials is a gradual process, but the change seems to be a natural evolution. The booming video, CD-ROM, computer software and music markets makes it increasingly difficult to main-

tain a handle on ordering. The decision to use jobbers is not a necessary one for certain institutions, namely those that have a full-time professional media librarian who can maintain the collection and its growth. Although I still would argue that even institutions in this situation can benefit from outsourcing certain segments of orders, particularly feature films or those that require extensive paperwork.

As the new editor of **Media Minder**, I will focus future articles on problems and

concerns for librarians working with audiovisual materials: copyright, public performance rights, cataloging videotapes, etc. I encourage people to message me via e-mail (abs@class.org), telephone (1-800-431-8913), or write to me if they have issues they wish to see discussed, clarified, supported, denounced. I wish this to be a forum for lively discussion and hope to shorten the links in the chain of an area of librarianship that has typically been complicated and cumbersome.