Against the Grain

Volume 8 | Issue 3 Article 16

June 1996

Back Talk

Tony Ferguson
Columbia University

Recommended Citation
Ferguson, Tony (1996) "Back Talk," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 8: Iss. 3, Article 16.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.1907

Back Talk

Calling Any Publisher: A Proposed New Fiscal Relationship

by **Tony Ferguson** (Associate University Librarian, Columbia University) <ferguson@columbia.edu>

I feel like the Maytag repairman of librarianship. Since asking periodicals publishers to call me about setting up contractual relationships for their family of titles at a guaranteed rate of increase, no one has called. But let me back up and explain: In February of this year at the annual collection development conference sponsored by the **University of Oklahoma Libraries** and organized by **Sul H. Lee**, I gave a talk entitled "Friends or Predators: Evaluating Academic Periodicals Price Histories as a Means of Making Subscription Decisions." It was a simple talk, **Kathleen Kehoe** from Columbia and I had compared 75 titles selected using a stratified technique that had inflated the most (predators) with 75 that had inflated the least (friends). We wanted to see how the predator titles differed from the friendly titles. We used the phrase, predatory periodicals, because their prices caused librarians to kill off other titles or to cut back in other non-related areas of library collection development.

We found that predatory periodicals not only increased in price faster, they cost more, they were found in the sciences, humanities, and social sciences, they were more likely to be foreign, they were more likely to be commercially published, and they charged libraries more than they charged individual readers. Interestingly, however, we found that most titles were friendly. In fact only 35% of the more than 4,000 plus journals from which we drew our sample increased faster than Columbia's book budget over the 1990 to 1995 test period employed.

So, where does the telephone call part come in? At the end of my talk I suggested that librarians could go one of two directions: First, they could continue down the track of canceling predators, and I suggested five good ways of communicating that we have had enough and were not going to take it any more:

1. Don't start up a subscription without first checking on its past price increase history. If it lacks a price history, check on it annually for the next five years. Supporting a predator should be done consciously.

2. Focus your canceling energies on predatory titles not publishers. We should put bookmark surveys in predatory titles that go something like this: This subscription cost of this title increased by 25% last year, do you think we should a) continue to subscribe, b) continue to monitor price increases, or c) cancel? How important is it to you? a) very important, b) important, or c) not important.

3. Inform users of price increases. Suffering in silence until you have to begin a cancellation project won't make the user feel happier and it won't communicate to the publisher that they are going down the wrong trail.

4. Tell editors and publishers you are evaluating their titles. I think we should also send "thank you" notes to the publishers of titles which increased at affordable levels.

5. When you do cancel, do it loudly. Tell everyone: publishers, editors, your users, etc. And tell them why. Most periodicals vendors can give you multi-year pricing histories for all of your titles. When you tell a publisher you are canceling their title, let them know how their increase level compared to the average.

Second, however, I suggested that publishers and libraries might want to consider establishing new fiscal relationships: establishing five-year noncancellable licenses for print or electronic journals that specify the rate of price increase. Publishers would have to guarantee realistic prices and libraries would have to guarantee they would not cancel subscriptions. Presumably, publishers would be willing to exchange higher price increases for stable revenues. Indeed, if they knew what their revenues would be, they would have a basis for deciding if more issues, more pages, etc., are possible or if new work flows are needed to reduce production costs. I asked publishers to give me a call if they were interested. So far, no phone calls. But maybe no one heard of my invitation.

To convince them of the need for change, I offered two scenarios as evidence: Both cases involved a hypothetical periodicals publisher who in 1995 produced 25 titles. Each of the 25 titles was priced at $20, each had 1,000 subscribers, and in both cases gross revenues increased by 15% annually. One scenario was entitled the "Mutual Suicide" model because, if followed, both publishers and library patrons were doomed. In this model the publisher annually increased prices by 20% but lost 6% of their subscriptions. By the year 2035, these annual price increases and subscription cancellations increased the price of a single subscription to $29,395 but with only 195 subscribers. While exaggerated, this model seems to be the one that is employed by some publishers today. Unfortunately, many are not satisfied with 20% annual price increases. The result of this model has been anger and frustration for librarians and canceled journals for patrons and publishers. It has produced cyclical cancellation projects, movements to deny publishers copyright in order to weaken their stranglehold on the whole academic enterprise, and schemes to go around publishers with universities publishing the research of their own scholars. I ask you, is this any way for businesses to make money or libraries to support the needs of their research communities?

A second scenario was called the "Steady State" model because, if followed, libraries could afford to pay their bills without killing any or perhaps fewer other titles and both publishers and library patrons would be benefited. In this model the publisher annually increased prices by only 8.5% and gained 6% more subscriptions as a result. By the year 2035, these annual price and subscriber base increases resulted in a $523 subscription cost but subscriptions had increased from 1,000 to 10,398.

Now I admit that I do believe in Santa Claus and that I annually help my wife hide Easter eggs for our six children, but I think the two models illustrate what can happen if publishers look to expanding subscriptions as the means of growing their business instead of killing the geese (libraries) that lay the golden eggs. I think periodicals publishing must be one of the very few businesses where reduced production in the largest market is a guiding principle for making money.

So here I sit, all alone by the telephone hoping for a long distance call from the Netherlands, Germany, England, Switzerland or even a local Manhattan call. Any publishers out there? If you call me I will keep it a secret or, if you are willing, use this space to announce the proposed new fiscal relationship to everyone.