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From the Other Side of the Street

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From the Other Side of the Street

Hard Issues between Soft Covers

by Kathleen Ketterman (University of North Carolina Press) <kjketter@email.unc.edu>

Column Editor's note: "From the Other Side of the Street" will cover issues of interest to librarians and vendors and be written from a publisher's perspective. The idea for this column grew out of the Association of American University Presses Committee on Library/University Press Relations. Please send your responses, along with any suggestions for topics of future columns, to me. — KK]

During the "lively lunch" on approval plans at last November's **Charleston Conference**, much of the discussion centered on simultaneous cloth and paperback publication and the paper-preferred option now being offered by vendors in their approval plans. Many publishers, certainly most scholarly and university press publishers, have seen a steady decline in the sale of hardcover monographs to libraries over the past decade. In a recent article in the *UNC University Gazette* describing how the faculty and staff have come to the aid of the library, it was noted that the UNC academic libraries saw a decline of more than 55% in materials purchased between 1984/1985 and 1990/1991. Donald Kennedy, a faculty member in the English department who headed a taskforce to restore library resources, said "The number of monographs the library could purchase dropped to the level of an undergraduate college, rather than that of a major research university. This had a direct effect on research capabilities and the University's ability to recruit new faculty, as well as an impact on our overall reputation. Essentially, if the quality of the library goes down, the quality of the school does also."

Book publishers are aware of many of the reasons for the decline of sales to libraries. We know that cuts in federal and state funding of higher education, the high cost of serials, the high cost of technology, inflation and a weak dollar abroad, and resource sharing and document delivery as ways to extend limited resources have all contributed to shrinking sales of monographs and to a crisis in the quality of many collections.

Given some of the comments and questions from librarians during this lively lunch [plus the statistics reported by Cella Wagner in this issue of *Against the Grain*, see page 4,

I thought it might be useful to try to explain why a publisher might choose to publish a book in a simultaneous cloth/paper edition. Here I am speaking from a university press perspective.

There are at least three reasons why a university press might choose to publish a simultaneous paperback: 1) the book will have immediate classroom use as a required or supplemental text; 2) there are a number of individuals who will buy this book in paperback but will not buy it if only available in cloth; and 3) there is simply no way to reasonably publish this book unless it is in a dual edition; that is, libraries may not account for enough sales to even warrant a printing of as few as 500 cloth copies. If a paperback edition of 1250 or 1500 copies is added to a printing of 400 cloth copies, it may then be feasible to publish the

earning back income from sales just as quickly as possible.

When I began my career in university press publishing in 1972, a first printing for a hardcover monograph in the humanities was two or three thousand copies. Most of those copies were sold to libraries. Now, the average cloth printing of a monograph in the humanities is 1250-1500 copies — half of what it used to be.

Publishers now find that printing 750 copies of a very narrow monograph, cloth only, is the norm. By the time review copies, author complimentary copies, award submission copies, exhibit copies, other complimentary copies, etc., are sent out, the publisher is left with about 650 copies to sell. In my experience, it is possible that we may only sell about 220 copies to libraries — worldwide! A few additional

copies are sold to individuals at academic conferences or through direct mail, where discounts might be offered.

The hardcover monograph, as the embodiment of scholarly research, is almost never found in any but the most specialized bookstores. After the few libraries and even fewer individuals buy this book, the publisher is left with around 400 or so copies that must be paid for and stored for the lifetime of the book. If the publisher is a not-for-profit university press, these copies will probably be warehoused for a very long time, selling just a few copies each year. Keeping a book in print is one of the missions of a university press. Finally, the book will eventually end up on a remainder list, in a publisher's white sale catalog, or otherwise

disposed of after a lengthy period of time.

You might ask, why not just print the quantity that you expect to sell? If we print fewer than 500 copies, arguably a more realistic number for the expected sales for the kind of narrow monograph I have described, the selling price is exorbitant. The price is determined by the "out of pocket" costs of composition and manufacturing, copyediting and proofreading, advertising and promotion plus the fixed overheads of administration (salaries, benefits, rents, etc.) and variable overheads related to the number of copies (e.g., cost of sales and fulfillment). The fewer the copies, the higher the price. Without substantial subsidy from a parent institution or

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book. Publishers are gambling that enough scholars and students will buy the paperback and enough libraries will purchase the hardcover to make this a viable alternative to cloth-only publication.

Other publishers at the "lively lunch" were startled when one librarian said that she thought that publishers announced the hardcover first (so that, presumably, all of the libraries would buy the more expensive edition) and then brought out the paperback — which the publisher has been keeping under wraps — only a few weeks or months later for the larger, individual market. Rest assured, I don't know one university press or other not-for-profit scholarly publisher who could afford to print and pay for copies of a paperback and not start

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the title subsidy that sometimes was available from the National Endowment for the Humanities, publishing monographs — especially in certain fields — is becoming nearly impossible.

It has been suggested and even hoped that electronic publishing with online access to fulltext monographs might provide the solution to this conundrum. But, as has been pointed out in articles in this magazine and elsewhere, the paper, printing, and binding costs are only a small percentage of the cost of publication. And it has yet to be proven that online access to humanities monographs is desirable from the point of view of the user.

On-demand publishing is another model for making available very narrow monographs. But the upfront, or first-copy, costs remain, and some mechanism is required for cost recovery. The result — when a book is printed on demand — is likely to be a very high per-copy price. And it isn't yet clear whether the demand for a single copy will be met by the librarian or the publisher (which of us will maintain the electronic text archives and provide access?).

After all of this digression, let me return to the original topic: to purchase paperback or cloth.

Publishers, when faced with these high costs of publishing limited-run monographs,

have sometimes chosen to publish the book in a simultaneous edition. This works if the book will be purchased by both libraries and individuals (either directly or through bookstores or through course adoption). Books in many contemporary fields of interest — especially cultural studies, film and media studies, and women's studies — are, in fact, nearly impossible to publish in any other format. The market cries out for a paperback. Individuals will not buy these books in expensive hardcover format but will buy them if they are published in a paperback edition (even if a high-priced one). We are still talking about fairly small print runs. The average printing for a simultaneous edition might be 400 or 500 cloth copies and 2000 or 3000 paperback copies.

University presses serve scholars by publishing research even though it has a limited market. Libraries serve scholars by purchasing the monographs, serials, and other materials that are required by the scholars and students on their campuses and in their communities. The decision to publish and the decision to purchase is made to support scholarly research and its dissemination. Librarians now are looking to the (slightly) less expensive cost of the paperback as a way of stretching their purchasing dollars. Publishers have turned to the simultaneous paperback to extend the print run and to spread the costs in order to publish the book at all. In fact, I believe that the decline of sales to libraries has been a major factor in the decision by university

presses to publish simultaneous paperback editions in the humanities. If, when there is a simultaneous paperback, clothbound sales erode further, then university presses will likely have to return to the high-priced, cloth-only edition to try to recover their publishing costs.

A statement attributed to **Thomas J. Wilson**, a former director of **Harvard University Press**, is posted on my bulletin board. It reads, "A university press exists to publish as many good scholarly books as possible short of bankruptcy." Publishers, at least university press publishers, are still trying to publish important books in a variety of academic disciplines — primarily in the humanities — and not go broke. Libraries are still trying to purchase as many of these books as possible with an ever-shrinking budget. "To buy paper, or not to buy paper, that is the question."

Buying the paperback instead of the cloth — and even publishing the paperback — may be a short-term fix to a long-term problem of chronic under-funding of the humanities. Neither publishers, librarians, nor vendors thrive within such limits.

Kathleen Ketterman is Marketing Manager and Assistant Director of the University of North Carolina Press. Before moving to Chapel Hill, she worked at Indiana University Press. She is the current chair of the AAUP Library/University Press Relations Committee.

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