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Letters to the Editor

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Against the Grain

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Letters to the Editor



Send letters to <strauchk@cofc.edu>, phone or fax 803-723-3536, or snail mail: *Against the Grain*, 171 Moultrie Street, Citadel Station, Charleston, SC 29409. You can also send a letter to the editor from the ATG Homepage at <<http://www.against-the-grain.com>> So now you don't have any excuses to put it off!

Dear Editor:

In "Acquiring Minds Want to Know: Is Fulltext half full or half empty?" (*ATG*, v.8#6, December-January, p. 70), Joyce Ogburn omits a key factor affecting fulltext database integrity: how both print and electronic publishers choose to address creators' rights.

At the National Writers Union, we launched a campaign, "Operation Magazine Index," which confronts companies engaged in fulltext delivery of previously published articles for which the author, rather than the first-print publisher, retains secondary rights. In our experience, the database company often responds to such complaints by removing the disputed works — but never accompanies this action by informing its customers that the product is now less complete than was advertised. (Librarians can decide whether this practice is more odious than its corollary: lying to the complainant about removing the works in the hope that we will simply go away.)

Of course, the NWU does not want articles removed from databases; as a member of the Digital Future Coalition, we support an expanded information superhighway and a generous definition of fair use. We do, however, believe writers deserve a fair share of the revenues from commercial uses of their work. Last year our Publication Rights Clearinghouse began distributing royalties through an historic collective-licensing agreement with UnCover. With a decision imminent in the landmark NWU-backed copyright suit,

Tasini et al. v. The New York Times et al., we look forward in 1997 to gaining even more visibility as a one-stop solution to the e-rights maze.

Irvin Muchnick (*Assistant Director, National Writers Union, National Office West, 337 - 17th St. (Suite 101), Oakland, CA 94612*); phone: 510-839-0110; fax: 510-839-6097 <irv@nwu.org>

Dear Editor:

I was happy to see a letter in response to my article on full text databases. Irvin Muchnick makes an important point that I did not address. When articles have different titles, or issues are missing, or individual articles are omitted, the purchaser does not know why. In fact unless each resource is systematically studied or a patron asks for help, librarians may never know that text is missing. Less than full text is a problem for selectors trying to cancel print to save or gain some extra dollars, acquisitions/serials departments ensuring the library gets what it paid for, public services staff helping patrons find articles through reference or ILL, and catalogers tracking the status of titles for cataloging. Providing less than full text (and less than full disclosure) may also be a problem for the producer if libraries decide not to purchase or catalog a title if it is seen as unstable or as having contents that are unreliable. Of course, it may be a boon for publishers who get revenue from the electronic version and do not see con-

comitant cancellations of the print version.

Muchnik also makes the salient point about authors' rights. In purchasing almost any product, whether print or electronic, librarians don't know about the ownership of the rights at the time of the purchase. After a print product is in the library, it is easy to see who has retained copyright to individual contributions. But is this something librarians ever check and is it desirable to do so? It's not so easy to browse the electronic version to check for copyright statements. Is this a problem, and if so, whose problem is it?

A natural follow up in *Against the Grain* would be twofold: 1) for producers of full text databases to describe how they put together the resources, the constraints they face, the kinds of rights they acquire, and how rights are acquired; and 2) for librarians to outline their expectations for more information from the producer, both up front at the purchase stage and throughout the subscription as contents change.

The goal of my columns is to stimulate discussion and raise interesting questions. How about some more dialog, folks? Who else has an opinion or information to share?

Joyce L. Ogburn (*AUL for Information Resources and Systems, University Library, Old Dominion University, Norfolk VA 23529*) phone 804-683-4189; fax 804-683-5767 <ogburn@lib.odu.edu>

Editor's note: Y'all. See this issue's Acquiring Minds (page 70) for more discussion of this important topic. —KS

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