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Acquisitions Archaeology -- Back to the Beginning (Vol. 1, No. 1, March 1989)

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Acquisitions Archaeology — Back to the Beginning (Vol.1, No.1, March 1989)

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March 1989 was just over 20 years ago. I don't, off the top of my head, remember what exactly I was doing that month. I do know that the most common color in my wardrobe was fluorescent green, my favorite music was performed by **Def Leppard** and **M.C. Hammer**, and I had never heard of **Starbucks**. While I — along with the rest of the world — have changed a bit over the past two decades, somehow it still does not seem like that much time has passed. However, in early 1989 there was still a Soviet Union, consumers wondered if "compact discs" really were better than cassettes, and the potential of the Internet still seemed very much the realm of science fiction.

And as I was carefully lacing a pair of bright green **Nike** cross-trainers on the west coast, issue #1 of a "quarterly communication" called *Against the Grain* was launched out east. (Incidentally, at ten pages long, it would prove to be the shortest *ATG* issue ever.) The publication emerged at an interesting time. While 20 years may be an interval too short to be "history" in the proper sense, at least to some, in many ways it seems an eternity ago for libraries. For those people integral to the process of information production, dissemination, and consumption, everything was about to start changing. Or was it? Intuitively, we who are publishing, vending, selecting, and acquiring are doing basically the same thing, only differently. But are we…?

With the launch of this column, I am setting out to explore not so much the history of acquisitions, per se, but a look back at how "acquisitions discourse" has changed — not just what we've done, but how we're thought about, discussed, and organized what we've done. The two general questions, then, guiding this ongoing investigation will be:

1. In what ways has the environment in which we work changed?

2. Are we doing the same thing in different ways, or are we really doing something altogether different?

Take, for instance, this first issue of *ATG* from March 1989. Two things are happening at once. The first thing is what the issue *looks like* and the other thing is what it *says*. So what *does* the inaugural issue look like? Well, as I mentioned, it is short — the only *ATG* issue to come in under 20 pages. It's just two sheets of 11 x 17 ivory paper, folded and collated together with three holes drilled in the left side, reminiscent of a community newsletter or one of those radical 'zines that used to crowd the magazine rack at **Tower Records**. (Browsing **Tower** for a new tape is something I might have done in 1989, though I always found the rack of 'zines, with their radical-ness, a little intimidating.) Instead of the familiar motto **"Linking Publishers, Vendors and Librarians"** there is the tagline **"News for Participants in the Charleston Conference."** The newsletter-like appearance is accentuated by the overtly "Mac-ish" look of the text and printing (including the wood-grain border framing the cover), while the 'zine-like quality is enhanced by the little image of the saw blade on the cover inscribed with the question "the cutting edge?" (see cover image, below). In all, the look is understated; a definite contrast to the extremely refined look and large size of its twenty-first century descendants.

But what does it say? Overall, it seems to say that the time has come: *"We need our own publication!"* Like all first-issues, this one declares that the discourse of acquisitions has advanced sufficiently to warrant a publication dedicated to the topic, and that it is a discourse of at least ten pages. Obviously, many discourses never make it past the first issue and like other first-issues, there is nothing that immediately indicates that subsequent *ATG* issues will be larger, publish more frequently, and continue for more than twenty years. We know with hindsight that it will, of course.

Complexities start to arise as soon as I attempt to situate myself within the discourse of the issue. Though some names — of both people and vendors — I do recognize, many I do not. The first rumor of the first **"Rumors"** deals with a failed merger of **Swets** and **Nijhoff**, two names that would also be at the epicenter of a tectonic shift in the vendor world when I started out in Acquisitions more than ten years later. I learned that **ReadMore Publications Inc.**, **John Menzies Library Services**, **John Coutts Library Services**, and **James Bennett, pty, Ltd.**, were once all a part of the Library Services Division of **John Menzies, plc**; though I've worked with **Coutts** and **Bennett**, I had no idea they were once part of the same company. Nor have I ever heard of **John Menzies**. Overall, though, the conversation and speculation about the marketplace is familiar even if some of the specifics are not.

Other things are familiar but also odd when considered as discourse. **Katina** apologizes, for instance, that the cost of registration for the **Charleston Conference** is going up — to $100. In the **"Bet You Missed It!"** feature, **Barry Fast** describes the **Pubnet** product featured in a *New York Times* article.[1] **Pubnet** is a pre-Web Internet software product that allows for "instant ordering," at a cost of up to $20,000 for publishers and a steep cost to bookstores that would use the system — $250 for the software and a $50 monthly fee. (For reference, the $20,000 would be over $30,000 in 2008, according to **MeasuringWorth**.[2] According to the same site, the subscription fee would be more than $75 a month in last year's dollars!)

In this initial look at the start of *ATG*, we can say that some things are the same, some things are not, and some of the problems (taking "problem" in a general sense) are still problems today. The real question that we are left with is how this history, our history, can inform the present, and whether it can provide solutions or perspectives that are meaningful (or perhaps just interesting) today. 🐾

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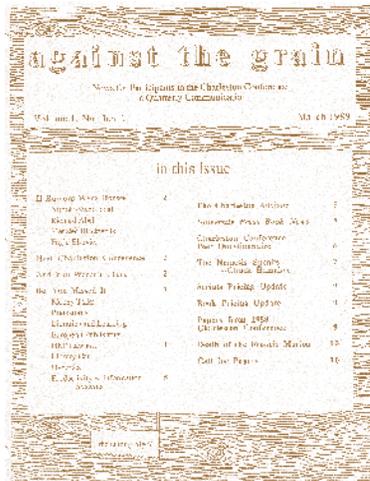
and cookbooks. Standardization of journal article markup — which could be extended to other forms of publications — could go a long way to making one of the issues surrounding mandatory deposit somewhat less complex.

The deadline for submitting comments to the **U.S. Copyright Office** on their proposed rule is August 31, 2009 and responses are due from the **Library of Congress** by September 28, 2009. The status of the proposed rules will take some time to resolve, but, more importantly, the larger issues surrounding implementation will likely take considerably more time to work out. 🐾

Endnotes

1. **Barry Fast**. (1989). "And Then There Were Bookstores…' Bookstores Look to Instant Ordering,' *New York Times*, January 12, 1989, 33." *Against the Grain*, Vol.1, No. 1 (Mar. 1989), p.3.

2. MeasuringWorth – *http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare*.