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Are Any Book Still Out-of-print

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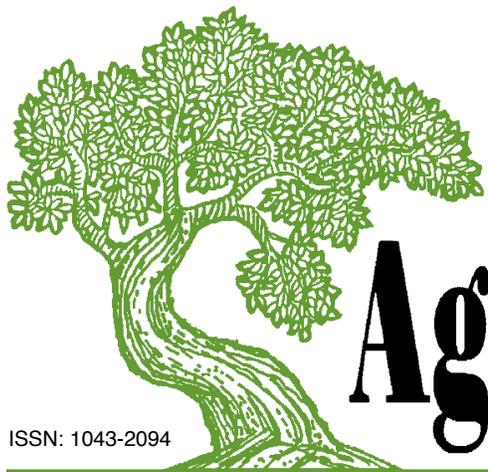
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Against the Grain

“Linking Publishers, Vendors and Librarians”

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Are Any Books Still Out-of-Print?

by **John Riley** (Editor, Library Marketplace, *Against the Grain*; Co-owner Gabriel Books; Chair, ALCTS Out of Print Discussion Group) <jdriley@comcast.net>

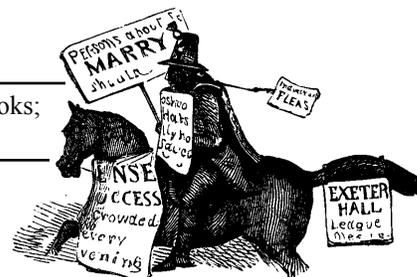
Once upon a time the term “out-of-print” actually meant something. Back in the days of setting up gargantuan presses with sixteen page jigsaw metal plates, making films, mixing inks, running color proofs and then folding and cutting the signatures the process of printing a book entailed minimum print runs in the thousands to be economical. One of these massive platen or Web presses could crank out two thousand copies of a five hundred page book in under an hour. When a book had sold out its print run it was considered “out-of-print,” because going back to press meant remounting those stored plates and doing another couple of thousand copies. Books which had gone out-of-print became the domain of specialist book dealers and were even considered rare books with an increasing value as they became more scarce.

Later, with the **Supreme Court’s** 1979 ruling in *Thor Power Tool Company v. Commissioner of Internal Revenue*, which prohibited companies including publishers from continually writing down the value of unsold stock, out-of-print came to describe more and more recent books many going out-of-print within a year or two of publication. Publishers found

it more profitable to dispose of inventory by remaindering or pulping than to warehouse it. That is when previously stored inventory began flooding the remainder tables in book shops and smaller print runs became necessary for publishers to survive. Since the late 1970’s many other factors have influenced the decision to print shorter runs. Books now endure a shorter lifespan in the marketplace because there are thousands of more titles printed every year. Once flush book budgets and pocketbooks have grown tighter as well. As **Calvin Trillin** so pungently observed, “Books now have a shelf life somewhere between milk and yogurt.”

The printing revolution is now over. POD (print-on-demand) and DOD (digitization-on-demand) have gone main stream. Academic and scholarly publishers, self publishers, and reprint publishers have all discovered the value of short run digital printing. To cite production figures from **Bowker’s Books in Print** database:

“The number of new and revised titles produced by traditional production methods fell 3% in 2008, to 275,232, but the number of on-demand and short run titles soared 132%, to 285,394. The



number of on-demand titles topped those of traditional books for the first time. The jump in on-demand output in 2008 followed an even bigger increase in 2007 when production skyrocketed 462%. Since 2002, production of on-demand titles has soared 774% compared to a 126% increase in traditional titles.” *Publishers Weekly*, 5/19/2009.

As technology improves digital printing may even take over the remaining print runs produced by traditional printing. Digital printing simply means printing that is computer generated, stored digitally, and produced di-

continued on page 14

If Rumors Were Horses

Welcome to the **Charleston Conference** issue of *ATG*! We are extremely heartened and gratified that our attendance for this, the **29th Charleston Conference** is excellent given the economic climate and the fact that many, many of you have written to say that you cannot come this year but will be sure to come next year! As of right now, two and a half weeks before the **Conference** begins, we have 941 attendees just 134 fewer than the same time last year! Like wow!

Just learned that **Alix Vance** <alixv@paratext.com> has been appointed **President**

of **Paratext**! She has most recently served as **Executive Director of the Reference Information Group at CQ Press**, a division of **SAGE**, responsible for the **academic and business reference publishing** and **CQ Researcher** divisions. She comes to **Paratext** with twenty years of experience in sales, marketing, and global business development, with particular expertise in digital product and business models. In her new position, **Ms. Vance** will continue to serve on the **Board of Directors of the Society for Scholarly Publishing (SSP)** and on the **Editorial Board** of the scholarly journal, *Learned Publishing*.

She is a graduate of **Wellesley College** (A.B) and *continued on page 6*



What To Look For In This Issue:

<i>Open Access and the Future of Scholarly Communication</i>	78
<i>2008 Charleston Conference Reports</i> ...	82
<i>The Author and the eBook</i>	90
<i>All Aboard the Twitter Train</i>	98
<i>Everything as We Know it will Change</i>	101

Interviews

<i>Ann Okerson</i>	44
<i>Dona S. Straley</i>	48
<i>David R. Lide</i>	50

Profiles Encouraged

<i>John Riley</i>	8
<i>Narda Tafuri</i>	30
<i>Mitchell Davis</i>	36
<i>David Taylor</i>	40
<i>Dona S. Straley</i>	52



Are Any Books Still Out-of-Print? from page 1

rectly from electronic data without the need for printing plates. We all do digital printing when we use our word processors and inkjet printers. Digital printing is helping to make the term “out-of-print” obsolete as publishers can now store digital copies of books for short print runs at any time. It has even become economically viable to print just one copy of some books. Publishers have found that working with companies such as **Lightning Source** and **Book Surge** they can even store, print and fulfill orders directly from the short run printer’s factory. The end product is indistinguishable from the original and the only way a vendor or library will know that it is POD is that it was shipped from the printer.

And now with Large-Scale Digitization Initiatives (LSDI) whole libraries are being digitized and their contents put up on the Web. LSDI by **Open Content Alliance (OCA)**, **Boston Library Consortium**, **Google**, **Hathi Trust**, **Universal Library**, **Project Gutenberg** and others are making millions of public domain titles that were once considered op available online for free. (www.publicdomain-reprints.org) also (re: LSDI <http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub141/sec1.html>)

The **Boston Public Library** in conjunction with the **Open Content Alliance** is taking it one step further with their Digitize on Demand service. From their site: “Simply search for a public domain book on **Open Library** and, if it’s at the **Boston Public Library** and hasn’t been scanned yet, you will see a “Scan This Book” button. When you click the button and follow the steps to confirm, we’ll have a librarian go and get the book from the stacks, bring it to our scanning center, and have our team of scanners digitize it page-by-page. The books are being highlighted in **GnuBook**, the Internet Archive’s exciting new bookreader, and are also available in other formats, such as PDF and full text. **BPL** also creates a Webpage of bibliographic information for each scanned book. (see <http://openlibrary.org/bpl>)

It is estimated that one hundred million separate titles have been printed since **Gutenberg**. At the rate that books are getting scanned we can expect to see the majority of important out-of-print books available online or as POD within a few years. In its infancy the Internet was blind to nearly 99% of the world’s information because books were left out. Now with 99% of information born digital the tables have turned. Books will be born as eBooks with a POD option.

The one challenger to POD that has arisen in the last few years is the hand held electronic book reader. Since it bypasses printing altogether publishers may embrace it to the detriment of print. No more “smearing dinosaur blood on dead trees” as the old saying about printing goes, even though dinosaur blood will still be needed to generate the electrons in eBooks. Still, hand held devices will only enhance the demand for op books. **Google** and **Amazon** are racing each other to offer more and more public domain books for free, **Google**

on **Sony** and **Amazon** on **Kindle**. Out-of-print books are a very inexpensive way to acquire content that fosters links to sell more advertising or to attract readers to more current eBook offerings, as when **Walt Whitman’s** *Leaves of Grass* links you to lawn care and sod dealers. But the quality and authenticity of many scanned books are dubious for us readers. As one **Google** engineer explained “We’re not scanning all those books to be read by people. We’re scanning them to be read by our AI.” **Nicholas Carr**, *The Big Switch: Rewiring the World from Edison to Google 223* (2008) (quoted from <http://www.openbookalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/Google-Book-Settlement-Fact-and-Fiction.pdf>).

Geoffrey Nunberg calls the Google Books Project: “A Metadata Trainwreck,” citing wrong publication dates, erroneous categorization, etc. For example “A book on **Peter F. Drucker** is dated 1905, four years before the management consultant was even born; a book of **Virginia Woolf’s** letters is dated 1900, when she would have been eight years old. **Tom Wolfe’s** *Bonfire of the Vanities* is dated 1888.... **H.L. Mencken’s** *The American Language* is classified as Family & Relationships. A French edition of *Hamlet* and a Japanese edition of *Madame Bovary* are both classified as Antiques and Collectibles.” (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 31, 2009)

And as **Robert Darnton** has noted, “**Google** employs hundreds, perhaps thousands, of engineers but, as far as I know, not a single bibliographer. Its innocence of any visible concern for bibliography is particularly regrettable in that most texts, as I have just argued, were unstable throughout most of the history of printing. No single copy of an eighteenth-century best-seller will do justice to the endless variety of editions. Serious scholars will have to study and compare many editions, in the original versions, not in the digitized reproductions that **Google** will sort out according to criteria that probably will have nothing to do with bibliographical scholarship.” (The Library in the New Age, *New York Review of Books*, Volume 55, Number 10, June 12, 2008, <http://www.nybooks.com/contents/20080612>.)

The last decade has also seen the rebirth of out-of-print books from online book merchants such as **Advanced Book Exchange**, **Alibris**, **Amazon**, **Barnes and Noble**, and many others. These companies maintain databases of well over one hundred million used and op books. Where librarians once had to send off wants and desiderata lists to **Jake Chernofsky’s** **Antiquarian Bookman (AB)** then wait weeks for return postcards quoting prices and condition they can now get that same information instantly on the Web. The Internet has radically changed bookselling as well. Many books have lost value as it became apparent that there were many more copies available than was previously thought. This happened to modern first editions whose scarcity was belied by the hundreds of copies that appeared for sale on the Web soon after publication. Even the once very marketable signed first edition is now very common for current authors. Some titles increased in value because of the Internet. Once obscure

scholarly, scientific and technical books that had been relegated to the dusty corners of used bookshops all of sudden became valuable when exposed to a worldwide market.

The op or better termed “aftermarket” for books will continue to grow as libraries expand their weeding projects, more used books stores go online only, and everyone turns into a part time used book dealer. Many people still prefer the original edition to a reprint so the POD market for reprints will continue to be challenged by the growing aftermarket. What POD can accomplish however is to bring more truly rare and scarce books to the market and thus to a wider public. As they do we can expect to see the prices for many rare books to decrease.

Reprints have always been a part of academic libraries. During the heyday of university expansion in the 1950’s and 1960’s reprint companies stepped in to fill the many new libraries that were created. Companies such as **Scolar**, **Hacker**, **Haskell House**, **University Books**, and **Barnes and Noble** stepped up to fill the gaps. My personal favorite amongst the reprint companies is **Dover** founded in 1941 by **Blanche** and **Haywood Cirker**. Many of their seven thousand titles remain in print today. They invented the modern trade paperback and in the process proved that obscure titles could sell if produced well and priced affordably. One other lesson they can teach POD companies is to always include an updated introduction or even a blurb. A colophon would also be nice in these new reprints indicating print date and location, type of paper, and any other historical data available. Reprint companies can do better justice to books and bibliography than simply printing a raw copy and putting it in a generic binding, usually paper, that has as much warmth as a **Cliff’s** **Notes** pamphlet. They can also collate their books before scanning so we don’t run into this type of scary caveat from **Kessinger**, a reprint company: “This title...may have occasional imperfections such as missing or blurred pages, missing text, poor pictures, markings, dark backgrounds...”

Perhaps we are on the cusp of every bibliomaniac’s dream: a universal library of all the important books from all times and places easily accessible to all with further capacity for quick and high quality reprints. There is a threat, however, that this utopia might actually turn into a dystopia as we risk trading all of our bookstores and libraries for a database of confused editions and “missing text.”

Our contributors have attempted to answer the question “Is anything still out-of-print?” I don’t think they have come up with a definitive answer, but I think all of them point us in the direction of an answer.

(Be sure to attend the **Charleston Conference Lively Lunch** on November 5 from 12:30-1:45 “Will POD Spell DOA for OP?” on the same topic where the authors will be expanding on their papers. Also keep open time at **ALA Midwinter** for the Out-of-Print Discussion Group where the topic will be Digitization on Demand in Libraries.) For more information contact <jdriley@comcast.net>. 🌱