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Narda Tafuri

University of Scranton, tafurin1@scranton.edu

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Libraries' Changing Buying Habits: So Many Books, So Little Money

by **Narda Tafuri** (Acquisitions & Continuing Resources Librarian, The University of Scranton, Weinberg Memorial Library, Scranton, PA 18510; Phone: 570-941-7811; Fax: 570-941-7809) <tafurin1@scranton.edu>

University presses and libraries have begun to release rare and not so rare public domain books from their vaults and shelves and make them available through print-on-demand (POD) for well below the average cost of a U.S. College Book (\$64.52 in 2008).¹ As of Aug. 2, 2009, **Cornell University Library** had 18,231 printed books available for sale through **Amazon.com**; **University of Michigan Library** had 42,713 available.² *Library Journal*³ stated that the **University of Michigan Library**, through an agreement with **BookSurge**, an **Amazon.com** affiliate, intends to make more than 400,000 POD titles available, while **Cornell University Library** plans to offer a mere 80K.

University presses such as **Pennsylvania State University Press**, **Cambridge**, **Princeton**, and others, are quickly following suit. It is not hard to see, why POD publishing is "skyrocketing" as described by *Publisher's Weekly*.⁴ It was noted that while traditional publishing during the time period of 2004-2008 fell by 2%, POD titles increased by 1346.5%. In 2008 alone, POD publishing increased by 38% to 560,626 titles.⁵

In 2005, **Holley** and **Ankem**⁶ studied the availability of out-of-print materials on the Internet and how that availability could impact library acquisitions strategies. **Holley** and **Ankem** concluded that "the distinction between in-print and out-of-print has disappeared."⁷ With **Amazon.com** and **Barnes and Noble** offering used and new books from the same ordering point the line between these two categories has become blurred.

The availability of the titles in the **Holley** & **Ankem** study was approximately 95%. The authors indicated that materials for libraries attempting to build collections in the humanities are available through the used/out-of-print Internet market at a significant savings. At the time of their study, they cited being able to purchase popular adult fiction titles for "no more than \$2.95, the most common current price for this material..."⁸

In **Levine-Clark's** 2004⁹ study of the used/out-of-print marketplace he concluded that "It is clear that there are significant numbers of

used and discounted new in-print books available through **Abebooks**, **Amazon**, and **Alibris**, many of them in large quantities and at heavy discounts from list price."¹⁰ **Levine-Clark** indicated that potential savings may be offset by the cost of labor needed in the searching and ordering process as well as shipping costs.¹¹

Librarians have more options than ever before for purchasing books. So, how are these options affecting the purchasing habits of acquisitions librarians and their staff? Has the availability of so many public domain POD titles available on the Internet affected library buying habits? In many cases POD books available on **Amazon** and elsewhere offer point of purchase options to in-print and used/out-of-print copies of books at much lower prices. Finally, will current economic difficulties cause librarians to seek "bargains" in the used/out-of-print marketplace?

A short survey of 15 questions was conducted from August 3 through August 22, 2009 using two library email lists devoted to library acquisitions and collection development: **ACQNET-L** and **COLLDV-L**. A total of 144 responses were received from librarians and library staff in academic, public, special and other libraries. The largest number of respondents worked in academic libraries (86.1% – 124 total) followed by public libraries (9.7% – 14 total). The remainder worked in special and other types of libraries (2.1% – 3 total – Special; 2.1% – 3 total – Other).

Of those libraries responding to the survey more than half (59% – 85 total) had a book acquisitions budget of less than \$500,000. While (29.9% – 43 total) of those individuals responding to the survey worked in libraries that had budgets of \$1 million or more to expend on the purchase of books. The remaining respondents (11.1% – 16 total) had budgets that fell in the middle (\$500,000 to \$999,999).

The vast majority of those responding to the survey indicated that their library purchased used or out-of-print books for the collection (92.4% – 133 total). Those libraries that indicated that they did not purchase used or out-of-print books (7.6% – 11 total) could not do so for a variety of reasons, including: buying restric-

tions placed on them by administration (no credit card, need to purchase from vendor awarded buying contract), not enough staff to handle the job of searching for out-of-print books, and acquisitions policies that barred the purchase of used books. These were the main reasons cited for not being able to purchase used or out-of-print books via the Internet.

When asked "for what purpose(s) are used or out-of-print books being purchased for your library's collection?" the vast majority of survey respondents indicated that copies were being purchased for "replacement copies of missing books" (88.2% – 127 total). However, 72.2% (104 total) of the survey respondents indicated that they were purchasing used or out-of-print books as part of "regular purchases" for their library's collection. Other types of purchases of used or out-of-print books included the purchase of "rare, out-of-print books" (56.9% – 82 total) and to a lesser extent "Rush" purchases of books (38.2% – 55). The respondents working in public libraries followed this pattern but the purchase of used or out-of-print books for "regular purchases" for the collection was far less (35.7% – 5 total) when compared to the respondents from academic libraries (75.8% – 94 total). The vast majority of used or out-of-print purchases by public libraries were for "replacement copies of missing books" (85.7% – 12 total).

Overall, when the respondents were asked about their libraries' buying habits when purchasing used or out-of-print books the overwhelming majority (81.3% – 117 total) indicated that used or out-of-print purchases only made up 1% to 10% of their library's book budget expenditures. A total of 15.3% of respondents (22 total) indicated that such purchases made up 11% to 25% of their library's purchases. All of those individuals that responded that their library's used and out-of-print purchases accounted for up to 11% to 25% of the book budget were from academic libraries.

When asked "Which used or out-of-print Internet book sites does your library use to purchase books?" the greatest number indicated that they used **Alibris** (86.1% – 124 total) followed by **Amazon Marketplace** (74.3% – 107 total), **AbeBooks** (56.9% – 82 total) and other (27.8% – 40). In the response to the category of "Other," respondents were asked to name their top three sites. Responses varied but **Barnes and Noble**, **Powells.com**, **Half.com**, as well as out-of-print metasearch sites such as **www.addall.com/used** and **Bookfinder.com** were mentioned. In some cases it was noted that

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Which used or out-of-print Internet book sites does your library use to purchase books? Please check all that apply.

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Amazon Marketplace	74.3%	107
AbeBooks	56.9%	82
Alibris	86.1%	124
Other (Please list top 3)	27.8%	40
answered question		144
skipped question		0

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the library's regular book vendor would also search for out-of-print titles.

Eighty-four percent (121 total) of those responding to the survey indicated that more than 50% (51% to 100%) of their acquisitions book budget orders are filled by book vendors. For those respondents working in public libraries the percent of orders filled by book vendors was even higher. Public library respondents said that more than 75% of their orders were filled by book vendors (92.8% of 13 total).

Survey respondents were asked "do you foresee your library increasing purchases of books from used or out-of-print Internet book sites in order to "stretch" the Acquisitions book budget?" More than half of those responding to this question (64.6% – 93 total) answered "No" to this question. Of those respondents working in academic libraries 63.7% (79 total) answered "No" to this question; while for those working in public libraries 92.9% (13 total) answered "No" to this question.

I followed up with a couple of respondents who answered "Yes" to this question. I asked **Jack Montgomery**, Associate Professor and Coordinator, Acquisitions/Collection Services at **Western Kentucky University** if ordering out-of-print/used Internet books was something that his library has started doing to stretch the regular budget. He said: "At this point in time, we automatically reassign any order for a book with a print date earlier than 2000 to an automatic O.P. purchase. We also, if time allows, look for used copies that offer a significant savings of 40% or more."¹² When asked if this was a change from how things had been done, he said: "Yes, we used to focus solely on ordering new materials in hardcover. We now buy a large percentage of our monographs in paperback and cover them with Colibri covers to preserve them. This program works really well and is popular with patrons."¹³ When asked how this has impacted staff, **Montgomery** stated: "We have accommodated this with little or no discernable impact on the workflow. One staff member handles all of these orders at this time and seems to do so with ease."¹⁴

Another respondent, **Eleanor I. Cook**, Assistant Director for Collections & Technical Services at **East Carolina University** indicated that they had been purchasing from the used and out-of-print marketplace all along. However, in April 2009 they had their book budget slashed and were forced to discontinue their approval plan. Now their book budget is

What % of your library's book Acquisitions budget orders are filled by book vendors? (Select one)

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
1% - 10%	4.2%	6
11% - 25%	4.9%	7
26% - 50%	6.9%	10
51% - 75%	14.6%	21
76% - 90%	36.8%	53
91% - 100%	32.6%	47
answered question		144
skipped question		0

so small they have begun comparing the prices on the approval plan invoices that they were unable to put forward for payment to pricing on **Amazon Marketplace**. The majority of the titles they would have purchased through the approval plan are available and most of the times are much cheaper. **Eleanor** stated that they have started shifting their thinking about purchasing to "just in time" rather than "just in case." She indicated that due to the budget cutback they have had to think this way. However, when this fiscal crisis passes, they

the Internet. Out of a total of 2,894 books purchased; 160 titles (5.53%) were purchased this way. **Amazon Marketplace** was the largest supplier of these titles with 122 books (76.25% of 160 total). The majority of these books were purchased not as replacement copies but as a part of regular book purchasing to reduce costs as well as locating hard to find copies. In fact, a number of books were purchased in this manner as a result of a request by the World Languages & Culture Department to develop collections on a number

Do you foresee your library increasing purchases of books from used or out-of-print Internet book sites in order to "stretch" the Acquisitions book budget? (Select one)

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	19.4%	28
No	64.6%	93
Other (please specify)	19.4%	28
answered question		144
skipped question		0

may not change back. This does not apply to all collection areas in the library.¹⁵

Survey respondents were given the following information and then asked to make a purchasing decision. They were then asked to indicate what was the most important factor influencing their purchase decision.

Overwhelmingly, the factors "Ease of Purchase" (40.3% – 58 total) and "Condition of the Book" (26.4% – 38 total) were more important to the respondents than "Price" (14.6% – 21 total), "Binding" (13.9% – 20 total) or "Availability" (4.9% – 7 total) in their purchase decision.

I decided to do a comparison and review the books purchased for our collection last year from used/out-of-print booksellers via

for foreign authors, i.e., **Horacio Castellanos Moya**, **Manuel Vazquez Monalban**, and **Ignacio Paco Taibo II**. A total of 60 books were purchased for this department from the used/out-of-print marketplace. This was 38% of all of the used/out-of-print titles that were purchased that year. As has been mentioned by both **Holley** and **Ankim**¹⁶ and **Levine-Clark**,¹⁷ the used/out-of-print market, is an excellent source for collection building.

The next two questions on the survey involved making POD (print-on-demand) books available to library patrons as well as the possibility of using an **Espresso Book Machine** as a way to generate revenue. The answer to the first question: "Does your library have any immediate plans to make public domain books available to patrons via print-on-demand (POD) at your library?" was in general "No" (90.9% – 130 total). This was followed by the questions: "Would your library ever consider selling books via POD (print-on-demand) or using an **Espresso Book Machine** as a way to raise revenues?" More than half of those responding said "No" (56.9% – 82 total). Another 40.3% (58 total) said

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If given the following choices, which copy of a book would be chosen to be purchased for your library's collection. Please select one of the following:

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
A print-on-demand paperback copy of a book that is available, "in stock" on Amazon for \$24.	1.4%	2
A used paperback copy of a book listed on Amazon Marketplace as available in "Very Good" condition, no marks, etc. for \$10.00.	7.6%	11
A used cloth copy of a book listed on Alibris as available in "Fine, as New" condition for \$15.00.	35.4%	51
A new paperback copy of a book that can be ordered through a book vendor with a 15% discount for \$20.00.	55.6%	80
answered question		144
skipped question		0

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"Yes — but we have no immediate plans to do this." Only 2.8% (4 total) said "Yes — we are considering doing this in the near future."

Peter Brantley has stated that "Print on demand, the on-demand printing and binding of a book traditionally initiated by a point-of-sale request, has rapidly permeated the commercial book marketplace and is on the threshold of providing libraries with a plethora of exciting new opportunities."¹⁸ **Tony Sanfilippo**, from **Pennsylvania State University Press**, spoke recently at a PVLOR Open Forum at the **American Library Association** conference in Chicago (July 13, 2009). The topic of the forum was: "I POD: We All Do Now — How Print-on-Demand Changes Everything." I contacted **Tony** about his presentation and asked him about how the ready availability of used/out-of-print books is affecting the POD market. He stated that "As for POD vs. used, I think there's already a glut in the market for public domain material. Everybody and their sister is listing POD editions of PD [public domain] material. Even our own *Metalmark* series is being affected as it's getting harder and harder to find books in the PD that don't already have a POD edition available. As for OP but in copyright, publishers should be putting all that material in POD but there are obstacles to that effort other than third party rights. Folks forget that a majority of that material isn't necessarily available in digital form. When confronted with this issue of offering our older titles in POD we have two choices — we can have the POD vendor scan the material (for a cost of about \$100 a title) creating a digital file which we may or may not be able to buy back from the vendor, or we can have it scanned ourselves which could then give the material a digital future as an eBook or Web content."¹⁹

When asked if he thought POD and **Espresso Book Machines** might possibly be a new business model for libraries, **Tony** stated that, "As for business models for libraries, I think the **Espresso Book Machine** may have the potential to give folks yet another service from their library. Why not offer patrons the option of a book for keeps? My biggest concern about the prospect comes from the bibliophile in me. I worry that it might lower the bar for quality standards in book production. But the reluctant capitalist in me suspects that perhaps markets and prices could leave room for the kind of high

quality book we here at **Penn State** take pride in producing, at least in the first edition."²⁰

University of Michigan Library POD offerings generally sell in the \$20 to \$39.95 range²¹ while those published by **Cornell University Library** average around \$16.98-\$29.99, with a few higher and lower in price. In the meantime, new copies of the same title can list on **Amazon.com** for as little as \$12.95 and booksellers on **Amazon's Marketplace** can have copies available for as little as less than \$3.00 each. It is hard to see how sales of POD books are going to generate revenues or compete in the online market.

The **Espresso Book Machine (EBM)** adds a new wrinkle to the acquisitions process. Perhaps, it would be cheaper to add an **EBM** and actually "print" a copy of a public domain book than do interlibrary loan (ILL). A recent article on POD by **William Dougherty** suggests exactly that.²² **Dougherty** states that it costs approximately \$10 for the **EBM** to produce a book in five minutes while recent ILL transaction studies show costs of up to \$30 to lend or borrow an item.²³

A few of the respondents to my survey indicated that their library might be ready, if not now, sometime in the future, to embark on one of these new exciting opportunities. With an estimated cost of between \$75K and \$95K, depending on how fast you want your book to come out, one wonders how many POD books you would have to produce before recouping your costs even with potential ILL savings.

One respondent indicated that the current financial situation had eliminated any such considerations. They felt that the long-term value of POD and **EBM** projects was "dubious."

This survey was meant as an initial look into the how and why libraries are purchasing books with shrinking monograph budgets. Preliminary conclusions seem to point to the fact that even with the expanding purchasing choices that are available to libraries, convenience and condition, seems to outweigh price or availability.

AbeBooks states on its Website's home page that: "More than 110 million new, used, rare, and out-of-print books are offered for sale through the **AbeBooks** Websites from thousands of booksellers around the world."²⁴ Yet, those responding to this survey preferred to use vendors even though the same books, in "New" condition were available at a much lower cost.

Offering print-on-demand has high interest but few libraries seem ready to start full scale programs or purchase **EBM's** at the current time. Very few libraries chose books that were "hot out of the book machine" as their purchase choice. The future, however, may hold a different story as used and out-of-print copies are bought up by libraries looking for "deals" as their book budgets disappear.

This survey did not explore the use of the **Kindle** and other book readers on libraries' buying habits. As these readers continue to develop and more presses make digital content available, their effect on the library marketplace will need to be weighed.

Endnotes

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What was the main factor influencing the purchase decision in the previous question? (Select one)

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Price	14.6%	21
Condition of the book	26.4%	38
Binding	13.9%	20
Availability	4.9%	7
Ease of purchase	40.3%	58
answered question		144
skipped question		0