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Death of a Salesman: The Demise of Periodical Agents?

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*So what's the report, boys, what's the report?*¹

Periodical agents have been part of the library and publishing scene for over 200 years, Everett's having started in 1793.² According to reliable sources, over 80,000 periodical articles are published every day. The future should be assured for agents. However, it has been suggested elsewhere, that if anyone in the information chain of publisher, agent, librarian, or reader were to disappear the periodical agent would be the first to go.³ This paper will consider what the chances of survival are for agents by looking at what they and their partners do now, what changes are affecting them and what they could do to survive.

*Be liked and you will never want...*¹

In order to survive, any species needs its allies, and periodical agents need to persuade both publishers and librarians that they have something to offer. Let's consider what agents have to offer librarians:

- * Single point of contact for purchase of journals, CD-ROMs, databases, and documents;
- * Handle all direct contacts with publishers;
- * Provision of one simple invoice to cover purchases for a year;
- * Handling of claims for non-delivery;
- * Provision of up-to-date prices and comparative data on prices;
- * Provision of material on approval for selection purposes;
- * Supply of individual articles on demand (document delivery);
- * Consolidation/outsourcing of supply;
- * Laundering of money once a year by pre-payment invoices;
- * Handling of foreign currency invoices;
- * Providing statistics;
- * Keeping finance offices off our backs;
- * Personal service, including: free lunches and gossip from other libraries (actually not as willing to gossip as booksellers);

Could we do without any of these services?

*Hey, that's a beautiful job of printing*¹

From the list of attributes of agents above, and from experience, we know how dependent they are on providing printed periodical supply. The problem is that printed periodicals are themselves a version of a long suicide note.⁴ Periodicals are being stored if not disseminated in electronic form, and many are now being regularly distributed electronically. When and if this is the primary mode of distribution, libraries will be able to bypass agents and get their electronic supply directly from the publishers (of course they could then bypass publishers and get their supply directly from authors, but that's another paper). Why should agents continue to be the interface between publishers and libraries, taking some of the publisher's profit and some of the library's time? Publication on demand, or just in time acquisition avoids altogether the need to fill up library shelves with unread articles as does the kind of document delivery practiced during online database searching. It also avoids the periodical agent altogether. Why will we need agents to be an interface between libraries and publishers in an environment of largely electronic journals?

Digitizing text avoids the old problems of poor quality input and over-production. Automated copyright pre-agreements can expedite production, all without the aid of an agent. Indeed, others have argued that academic (esoteric) publishing needs to break free of expensive paper and move to electronic publishing whereby at least 70% of costs could be saved.⁵ In libraries strapped for cash, any kind of saving, let alone on the order of 70%, would be welcome. Libraries, too, are being marginalized in some ways. In academic institutions, maybe particularly in the USA, but also in those with large modular courses in the UK, the introduction of coursepacks of selected copyright-cleared readings is expanding rapidly. If a copy of the article you need is in your coursepack there will be no need to travel to a library to find it.

*A perfect proposition all around...*¹

Publishers are squeezing agents by decreasing their discounts to them. Libraries are squeezing agents by putting their periodical supply out to bid (albeit not always the choice of librarians). Discounts are almost non-existent from society and institutional publishers.

It is an interesting facet of the transatlantic experience that in the USA discount is negotiated with agents as an up-front handling charge, while in the UK discount is scarcely available and mark-up's are insidiously and silently imposed.

If agents are squeezed, then it may follow that publishers will only want to deal with large solvent agents, thus squeezing out the smaller players. On the other hand, publishers may not want to lose their annual cash injection so relied on by Robert Maxwell, and described by him as payment for goods neither made nor supplied. However, it is not beyond the wit of producers of electronic journals to control payment at the time of use or at the password allocation time for a subscription. Who will own electronic journals is a worrying question and libraries and authors may not always be so happy to see publishers imposing their version of quality control. Who will archive the material is also a matter of concern to libraries which have traditionally stored knowledge.

One further factor which acts on the publisher/librarian relationship and may well bypass agents is the current hot topic of licensing. Consortial licensing agreements in the USA, **Infobike** in Manchester's universities and the current **National Site License** initiative in the UK since 1996 all threaten the livelihood of periodical agents.⁶ If a central payment for access is made and no paper copies are delivered (or not delivered) — who needs an agent?

*Exactly what is it that you want from me?*¹

Libraries are in the business of providing information in whatever format is suitable to their users and in whatever format they can find. Continuous cuts have led them to be more aware of costs and they are not above canceling periodicals and looking for alternatives. One such alternative is to access holdings in other libraries and here libraries have the evolutionary advantage over agents, since libraries are able to work cooperatively and agents are in competition with each other for survival. It has already been mentioned that libraries, sometimes against their will, are forced to bid for supply, but this may bring financial advantages to the library. For the agent this brings extra work and possible loss of lucrative business to a competitor. Even if libraries do not deal with a unique supplier they will still prefer to deal with fewer rather

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ing for off-campus shelving, we all fall into the trap of negative rhetoric, referring to "sending some books off" (as if to their deaths), "saving" or "keeping" others, "putting the burden" on some parts of the collections, and so on. Perhaps the most extreme example of this is the language used in some library literature: "stock control," "dead stock," "block regulation," "final extraction." (J.A. Urquhart and N.C. Urquhart). And certainly the spin put on this process in the recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* articles is no exception: "In the new model of the research library, unused books are out, computers are in," and "Universities see off-campus warehouses as the best way to house bulging collections." (CHE, Oct 17, 1997, p. A27) This, it seems to me, is a good example of how *not* to talk about this issue! While it is true that for users the ideal library would probably have all its physical holdings immediately accessible, on open shelves for consultation and retrieval, an off-campus facility can offer very real benefits, and the faculty need to hear about them: on-campus collections that are more coherent and better suited for brows-

ing, off-campus shelving that offers an optimal environment and responsive service, a pledge to return materials to campus when use patterns change, and a delivery commitment (within 24 hours to anyone on many on-campus sites) that can be an attractive addition to stack-browsing.

B. Strategies. There are many ways to involve faculty in this process, from holding campus-wide informational forums, speaking to department meetings, and asking for faculty advisory groups to send lists of likely candidates for transfer and make the books themselves available for review. We held a series of forums last spring to introduce the Art & Sciences faculty to the concept and to hear concerns. We also gathered library selectors together to discuss strategies and answer questions in two special forums. As the library liaison to the English department, I asked the Chair to put together a small advisory group, which met in the summer to talk about possible categories for transfer. I brought a list of my thoughts, as well as stacks of background documentation, and was prepared to make a hard sell. The group—three senior full professors and one assistant professor, representing different periods and schools of thought — brushed aside my opening gam-

bit with "we've read that, we all know that, let's talk about the collections," and proceeded to take my recommendations and broaden them: where I suggested 1800 as a cut-off date, they wanted 1850; where I talked vaguely about "older" periodicals, they suggested keeping on campus periodicals only from 1950 forward. I was flabbergasted — and delighted. Of course it remains to be seen how their colleagues will respond — we haven't had that meeting yet! Nonetheless, the big lesson here is that faculty have much to contribute to the selection process and are, as one of them impatiently said to me in another context, "reasonable human beings."

Conclusion

If planned carefully and managed effectively, off-campus shelving facilities can provide splendid conditions for long-term preservation and security as well as relief and rationality to the on-campus libraries. They can also provide an opportunity for librarians and faculty to work together to define and shape the collections, both now and for the future.

This paper was adapted from a paper delivered at the Charleston Conference, Nov. 1997.

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than more suppliers, in order to cut down on bureaucracy. They may well prefer to deal with a few agents than a myriad of publishers.

Services such as **BIDS** in the UK and **UnCover** in the US which can link database searches to document delivery can avoid agents in the chain (they can avoid libraries, too), unless the agent owns the document delivery service. Certainly such electronic services can give libraries the information they need about periodical use and justification for cancellation of paper copies.

With the activity of libraries and publishers changing, there is bound to be a knock-on effect on agents.

Isn't that a crummy characteristic? ¹

The question is, can agents continue to administer information and hold it together when libraries and publishers seem to be moving ahead in the information game? Agents are service and labor intensive. Can their only advantage be to pit one company's sales force against another? Agents report that they are having increasing success in consolidation work, checking-in and processing periodicals for libraries? ² But for how long will this reversion to their original role where they actually used to handle the supply in a physical way, give them enough income as libraries switch to the electronic paradigm?

In library supply of periodicals there used to be five big agents and now there are four. Those unlucky libraries who had to reallocate their supply away from ailing firms may have questioned what they were doing using agents anyway. Was it preferable to go for the company which took over the dying firm or was it better to consider an unknown quantity in the form of a different agent entirely? What would persuade them to change allegiance? Surely only some value-added service upon which they could rely? Should they bother to send their CD-ROM and electronic purchases to agents when the publishers are literally knocking at their doors and the licenses for these products have to be handled anyway by the leasing parties? What can agents offer that can tempt librarians, beyond their current service?

A salesman has got to dream, ...it comes with the territory ¹

What then can agents do to avoid their own death? They have to dream up some role for themselves which will not leave them spilling out of the supply sandwich. They have to look at what is bugging their customers and how they can plug the gap. Some of the areas they can look at might include those topics which when two or three librarians are gathered together they tend to discuss. Topics like copyright clearance, myriad licensing agreements for networking databases, facilities management of IT, telecomms and archiving of electronic material exercise the time and patience of

librarians and they could use some expert help in these areas. Of course, it is not up to librarians to provide a role for agents but they are not likely to want to use moribund organizations for supply. If that were our task in this paper, we would be asking for jobs with periodical agents. However, the work of librarians and publishers and agents is changing rapidly. If periodical agents do not change, the salesman of Miller's title may share his epitaph with periodical agents — *He never knew who he was....* ¹

Endnotes

¹ Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*. Macmillan, 1989.

² Luijendijk, Wim, "Subscription agencies: fewer, tougher, more agile — and beleaguered." *LOGOS* (1993): 4 (2):95-98.

³ Sylge, Caroline. "Squeezed from both sides: futures for subscription agencies managing information." (1995) (2):24-27. Also, see Christopher Gasson, "An End to Intermediaries?" *The Bookseller*, March 1998.

⁴ Harnad, Stevan. "Electronic scholarly publication: quo vadis?" *Managing Information* (1995) (2): 31-33.

⁵ Odlyzko, A.M. "Tragic loss or good riddance? The impending demise of traditional scholarly journals." *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies* (1995): (42):71-122.

⁶ Chapman, Liz. "Developing site licensing with particular reference to the national United Kingdom initiative." *Advances in Librarianship* (20) (1996): 123-149.

⁷ McDaniel, Richard W. "Made to measure." *The Bookseller* 30, 6/1995:38-40.