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Op Ed: Publishers Will Adjust to the "Crisis in Scholarly Publishing," But Will Scholars?

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Publishers Will Adjust to the “Crisis in Scholarly Publishing,” But Will Scholars?

Perhaps you have read about it in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Lingua Franca*, or even *The New York Times*. Perhaps you have had a frustrating time placing your own work with a publisher or helping a protégé publish a dissertation. But one way or another, most of us are already aware of the fact that the publishing world and the academy are no longer working together as smoothly as they once did. To sum up the situation without much attempt at subtlety: every year, libraries (and scholars and students, for that matter) reduce the proportion of their budget that is earmarked for the purchase of scholarly books — and they can do so without a commensurate loss of access to scholarly resources, thanks to the computerization of interlibrary loan and document delivery services. As a consequence, sales of the average scholarly monograph have ratcheted way, way down, from roughly 1,500 copies per title twenty years ago to around 300 copies per title (worldwide) in the mid-1990s (*The New York Times*, November 18, 1996, and March 2, 1997), with nearly 100 percent of that total going to those major university libraries that are still committed to maintaining complete collections. There is, of course, no guarantee that the collecting libraries will be able to sustain that commitment of dollars and shelf space; indeed, there is every indication that the scholarly monograph sales average is headed down toward the 200s.

Keep in mind that a monograph is by definition a specialized work of scholarship that is written to be read by one's peers in the academy. In most fields, this is not a readership that is expanding. All this is well understood by both the publishers and the libraries so I would like to use this opportunity to proceed to the next level of argument.

Breaking Even: An Unreasonable Expectation?

Scholars need to be aware that publishers — including an increasing number of university presses — are commercial operations that must generate revenues sufficient to cover their outlays. The latter encompass considerably more than the obvious expenditures for paper, printing, and binding (costs that, inflation aside, must increase per unit as print runs decline). Publishers have to buy computer equipment and furniture; they pay rent and phone bills, salaries and benefits, freelancer charges and readers'

fees. Our offices are not posh, but we like to heat and cool and light them; likewise the cavernous warehouses that house our unsold books. We spend enormous amounts of money on catalogues, direct-mail marketing campaigns, advertising, and now Web sites. Add it all up and you find that, in order to keep even a relatively modest scholarly publishing operation going, you need to net around \$30,000 per title, on average.

When I say “net,” I refer to the fact the publisher receives only 50-80 percent of a book's list price after wholesalers and other distributors deduct their discounts. (Authors' royalties are then paid out of the publisher's share.) Compare that target of \$30,000 per title with the current average unit sales for scholarly monographs — 300 copies worldwide — and you will have a good idea why publishers are heading off in other directions. Just do the math. Selling 300 copies of a scholarly book at a list price of \$60 (!) with an average discount of 30 percent will net the publisher \$12,600 — and a lot of complaints: from the author, who wants to believe that sales might have quadrupled if the price been quartered (not so), and from the press's chief financial officer, who holds the acquiring editor accountable for a \$17,400 loss.

If the demand seems to be there, the publisher might venture an additional investment in a paperback run. Adding sales of 500 paperbacks with a list price of \$20 can

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bring your net up to around \$20,000, for a shortfall of \$10,000. This is a figure you can offset with another title that nets \$40,000 or more, but the latter is unlikely to be a scholarly monograph.

Publishers Change Their Mix

It is not too dramatic to say that scholarly publishers have been looking for survival strategies for decades. We've tried increasing and decreasing the number of titles we publish. We've introduced cost-cutting and labor-saving innovations at every stage of the publication process. We've gone through a revolution in typesetting technologies; we've changed printers and manufacturing methods; we've taken upon ourselves, and asked our authors to assume, many of

the tasks that were once performed by editorial assistants. We've summoned up all the optimism we could muster to argue that somebody's manuscript will be “of interest to scholars in a wide range of fields” and “appropriate for use in upper-division courses” and therefore “suitable for paperback release.” All of this helps some, but none of it has increased the demand for scholarly monographs.

The inescapable conclusion that scholarly publishers have reached is that we need to “change the mix”: devote a smaller share of the slots in our lists to monographs (all the more carefully chosen) and a larger and growing proportion to types of books that have a better chance of meeting or exceeding sales goals; namely, reference, trade, and textbooks. There is nothing inherently wrong with this shift of focus. A publisher that produces top-quality scholarly reference works, upper-division and specialized classroom texts (not profitable enough for the big textbook houses), high-end (low sales) trade books, and a small number of excellent scholarly monographs is arguably

making a greater contribution to the general advance of knowledge than it would have had it devoted all its resources to monograph publishing. Certainly, from the editor's standpoint as well as the author's, it is tremendously gratifying when a book is not only well reviewed but also widely purchased — when people consider a book so valuable and so useful that they want to own it themselves, make sure their library acquires it, and require their students to read or consult it. Put this way, it almost sounds like a good change, doesn't it? Well, it is a good change — unless, of course, you're at the bottom of the academic career ladder and your mission is to get your dissertation published in the very near future.

Should the Academy Adjust, Too?

If scholarly publishers are now retreating, willy-nilly, from traditional modes of scholarly publishing, how are young scholars

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Who Owns What Now?

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search software company which **Reed** later sold to **Open Market** in 1997). Many years earlier, **Michie** had acquired **Bobbs-Merrill** and **Allen-Smith** (small statute publishers). Before acquiring **MDC**, **Reed** bought **R.R. Bowker** (primarily bibliographic products and directories) in 1985 and **Martindale-Hubbell** (US Legal directories) in 1990. After the sale, **Reed** merged **Michie** and the American division of **Butterworths** to form **Michie-Butterworths**.

Although **West** was huge and had bought one or two small companies such as **Banks Baldwin** and **Barclays** over the years to round out its collection of state statutes, until the summer of 1995, **West** had generally stayed out of the fray. In early 1996, **West** was sold to the growing **Thomson** organization creating the **West-Thomson** conglomerate which clearly owns the largest share of North American legal information assets. As part of that merger, the Justice Department required **West-Thomson** to divest itself of a number of titles, all of which were purchased by **Reed Elsevier** and made a part of its **Lexis Law** division which also includes **Michie** and **Butterworths**.

In the last year, **Wolters Kluwer** has purchased **Commerce Clearing House** and the legal division of **Wiley** (**John Wiley & Sons**). And then in October of 1997, **Wolters Kluwer** and **Reed Elsevier** announced that they would merge to form **EWK**. But now that merger is off.

The story of what happened to **Shepard's/McGraw Hill**, like that of **Prentice Hall**, is intertwined with both **West-Thomson** and **Reed Elsevier/Lexis**. **Shepard's/McGraw Hill** had two major legal lines; a series of legal citators and a series of legal treatises. The **Shepard's** name had been closely associated with the citators for over a hundred years and

as computer citators were developed, **Shepard's** was widely criticized for a variety of problems. So **Shepard's** decided to get out of the treatise business and concentrate on improving its citators. **Thomson** bought most of the treatises and assigned them to a variety of its divisions, but the lion's share of them eventually wound up with **Clark Boardman Callaghan**. Shortly after the treatises were sold off, **Matthew Bender** (a division of **Times-Mirror**) and **Reed Elsevier** reached agreement to jointly purchase **Shepard's Citators** which is where things stand at present with the citators. It appears that there is an agreement that if either company is sold, the other has a first option on the **Shepard's**

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citators. Speculation is that **Reed** will be a major bidder for **Matthew Bender**. Even if **MB** goes elsewhere, **Reed** appears to still have their option so the citators will almost certainly become a **Reed** asset. (But then we thought the **EWK** merger was almost certain too.)

Figuring out what the new megaconglomerates are doing with current internal organization of titles and billing is sort of like trying to balance on a ripe banana peel on a well-oiled floor. But I'll take a stab at it as of early January 98 (which is when I am writing this). It appears that **West-Thomson** intends to turn **CBC**, **LCP** and **West** into brand names. The **Shepard's** and **WG&L** brand names appear to be being eliminated and merged into the other three brand names or moved to the **RIA** division. Most but not all of the **WGL** periodicals have become **RIA** titles. Some of the **WGL** treatises that were updated several times a year have also become **RIA** titles. Most of the rest of the **WGL** treatise titles and a few periodicals became **CBC** titles. However, it appears that the banking part

of **WG&L** has gone to **A.J.Pratt and Sons** which apparently plans to convert the titles to interfiled services eliminating the option of buying one cumulative supplement per year. Most of the **Shepard's** treatise titles became **CBC** titles. Billing for **CBC**, **LCP** and **West** brands is semi-consolidated at this point, although many problems still need to be worked out. For the present at least, **RIA** appears likely to remain separate for some purposes such as billing, although for other purposes **RIA** appears to be very closely connected to the **West Information Group** part of **West-Thomson**. **CIS** is also part of **West Information Group** for some purposes, but I haven't figured out exactly what that means.

It appears that **Reed Elsevier** is in the process of consolidating all of its US print legal publishing under a new division called **Lexis Law**. So far the acquisitions of **CCH** and **Wiley by Kluwer** are too recent to tell

what effects that merger would have on the publications and accounts.

All of this is very confusing and difficult to follow. I've found it helpful to take a skill out of my genealogy hobby, and construct sun charts showing the major relationships. Like my genealogy charts, for some relationships I know only the names, while for others I know more of the lineage and at least approximate dates for when the changes occurred. If those charts can help me visualize all the relationships arising from births, deaths, multiple marriages, divorces, unmarried parents and adoptions, then why shouldn't they help me remember and apply what I know about publisher relationships to solve library problems. Now if only the whole tech services staff could enjoy publisher genealogy as much as I enjoy family genealogy, there might be something positive in this all too fluid world. 🌳

P.S. I promise future columns will be much shorter, more along the lines of the third paragraph of this article.

Op Ed

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ars going to be able to build the kind of publication record traditionally required for retention, tenure, and promotion in the academy? How is it possible that some universities are actually raising the publications bar while their own presses are being forced to reduce their commitment to monograph publishing? How, under these circumstances, can university presses continue to perform the screening and legitimization functions assigned them by the academy? Granted, the best work does get published, and published well. Granted, there are always presses springing up or expanding or establishing new niches, and the savvy author will find a home. Granted, the real problem is that academic job markets are very tight,

and nothing the scholarly presses do will change that fact. But, if scholarly publishers continue on their present course, and libraries on theirs, and no technological breakthrough comes along to change the calculus, the scholarly monograph as we know it will be fighting an ever steeper uphill battle. Are academic departments in the social sciences and humanities prepared to reconsider the weight they give to articles and other means of disseminating scholarly research? Will they ascribe more value to translation, editing, reference, pedagogical, and large, collaborative projects — projects that publishers welcome because they serve the needs of a broader audience (in the thousands, rather than dozens)?

I hope that school officials, senior faculty, dissertation advisors, and national organizations of scholars will soon come to terms with

the fact that the revolution taking place in the way information is disseminated has had a dramatic impact — both positive and negative — on the economics of publishing. The next casualty of this revolution may be the scholarly monograph — at least the average, narrowly specialized scholarly monograph — which no longer supports the costs of hardcover publication. We can improvise and innovate a little bit more, but I think the die is cast, and we are all going to have to adjust to the new reality. 🌳

*NB: Adapted from an article published in the March, 1998 issue of **NewsNet**, the newsletter of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies.*