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Not Fit For Print — Tenure and Publishing: Strange Bedfellows Indeed

by **Tony Leisner** (Dawson Information Services Group) <71023.3440@compuserve.com>

The purchase of **Random House** by German giant **Bertelsman** brought forth the predictable howls of protest from authors and agents. "Real writers will struggle, there will be fewer places for agents to sell, advances will decline, contracts will be canceled" and so on, and on, and on. Back in 1983 a significant change took place in publishing. There were only a handful of big houses, mostly in New York, when Apple and desktop publishing emerged. Suddenly, in just a period of a few months, anyone could be a publisher without New York. With just rudimentary skills, someone with a good topic and worthy credentials could produce a book all the way to camera-ready and self publish. Now a book on a subject that might not have a large enough audience for a big publisher could find its way to creation. One of the early titles was published by the New Glide Church in San Francisco and described something that magazines had only mentioned, AIDS. Tens of thousands of copies were sold to an audience that already knew what editors in New York had not even heard of in 1983.

I was with **Quality Books** then which is now a **Dawson**-owned company. We saw that the problem the self publisher would have was the traditional distribution system and the need to have a trusted supplier for libraries. Librarians were always, for the most part, willing to buy small press titles, but wanted to have traditional invoicing, cataloging, and good information about the title. Since most wholesalers responded to demand created by advertising or reviews, a small press with no budget wasn't going to be of interest to them. *What Color is Your Parachute* was one of thousands of self-published books that faced that problem; *The Road Less Traveled* another. A plastic surgeon in New Orleans published a book so that patients would know what to expect from his service. He just wanted to send it to them in advance of appointments to save time answering questions, but a local bookstore picked it up and he eventually sold nearly 15,000 copies. Technology had increased the amount of available information and output, but distribution choked off access to most new publishers. So, **Quality Books** moved into the sale and distribution of small and self-published books, non-fiction only. Oh sure, there was some librarian resistance, too. Not everyone wanted another supplier and one librarian even told me that the small press books couldn't be any good or a big publisher would have printed them. Inertia isn't easily overcome in any field.

Dejà Vu

As an Adjunct Associate Professor at a

prestigious university graduate management school, I stumbled on a situation that paralleled my experience in the small press explosion. I had created a new course in the marketing of intangible services. It was a sell out with classes running over 100 students per quarter and I had written much of my own material. I thought it was publication worthy, but so did several others on the faculty. I didn't need to publish for tenure or speaking fees or even royalties, but they did. A very senior professor told me how the system works. We would co-author but I would do all the work. He, because he was the editor of a journal that frequently published other professors' work, could get one of them to publish "our" work. Then I could see my name in print, nothing more. Furthermore, since the article wouldn't actually find its way into print for six to twelve months, we could share the subject in speeches for a tidy sum. Then the bomb got dropped. He had a friend who was up for tenure and needed to "get in on the article." Now I am not taking sides on tenure, but this seemed wrong to me, and my objective was to widely share my views with as many practitioners as possible. This appeared to be doing the opposite. Now my knowledge would be edited down to fit space available, published in a journal with very limited distribution, be delayed by up to a year, and the publisher and the tenure seeking guy would be the only gainers. I understand publishing to make money, to share ideas, to create controversy and even to keep a job. What I didn't and still don't understand is why it must be print only. The old timers want to see their work on the shelves all bound up. The publisher is afraid if it isn't tangible and bound, they won't get paid. But I was writing and researching on marketing of intangibles and was frustrated by the need for a tangible product, print in this case, before credibility could be achieved. Pretty tough on a guy teaching the marketing on intangibles.

Digital publishing today is what desktop was in 1983.

It is the same challenge to traditional print publishing that small press was for New York big houses. The big publishers lost untold numbers of good writers and titles to self-publishers and the journals that now turn away good researchers and subjects because they don't have room for them and will lose them too. These authors will self publish and the distribution system will change to accommodate them. Electronic publication can have peer review. It may not be the same group that currently is on the mastheads of today's journals, but they will be experts. What will the

biggest difference be?

Now it might well be the University or, heaven

forbid, the actual author who gets paid. Without the cost of paper, print, make ready and mailing not to mention the dead trees and clutter resulting from 80% of articles published, but ever never read, there will actually be a way of placing tangible value on an intangible product. If no one buys it, then the value is established. Or, if the author just wants to freely share research, then that too occurs. A professor compiling a case packet needs only to purchase rights to download articles into laptops of students and we all save money, increase the distribution and spread knowledge. Who pays and who gets paid? As in all cases, the consumer of the product, tangible or otherwise, pays according to the value placed on the product. However, now the producer of the product might also be paid, whereas now only the compiler, the publisher, gets paid. When a compiler restricts the dissemination of information due to her own financial constraints, the market finds a way around the constraint. Print journal prices keep rising and the number of articles doesn't change. Yet the amount of information needed and available but not printed explodes.

Many learned journals print the titles of articles accepted but not published. Why? Just because they lack the money to publish all of the worthwhile articles seems a restraint upon their profession when alternatives exist. Of course, all this could change if the old timers didn't need tangible evidence of their print worthiness and tenure review would include electronic publication. So long as so many professors get paid for positions as journal editors, this will be slow coming. But come it will. As universities face the need to reduce tenure costs, increase revenue and get paid for the research they fund as well as focus on teaching, they will be more receptive to this change. In the meantime, don't be surprised to see a group of professors approach an electronic distributor and self publish. They and the distributor will share the proceeds as they should. All that is needed is a reliable entity which will archive, distribute, and process the proceeds from the transaction. Where there is a need, someone will seize the opportunity. Of course, this won't be the same opportunity for everyone. But, change will come and knowledge can't be kept under a basket and have real value. There once was a time when people worked for the same company for a lifetime too. 🌧

