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Back Talk — What Business Are We In?

by **Anthony W. Ferguson** (Associate University Librarian, Columbia University) Phone: 212-854-7401; Fax: 212-854-9099 (new fax number!) <ferguson@columbia.edu>

The recent imbroglio over **Congressional Universe** brings up the question: What business are we in?

Of course, for some academic librarians, the choice of words in this question is offensive. Librarians, they would contend, are not in any business. We are not information commodities traders or sales clerks. The students and faculty members who come to our libraries are researchers, not knowledge workers. For the information broker, however, the library is very much like a supermarket or department store that sells information—except that the money is taken from clients and their supporters before the person in search of information enters the library physically or electronically—a prepayment plan.

I think the mix-up over **Congressional Universe** stems partly from this difference in philosophy. For the non-mercantile librarian (the majority), Congressional Universe is an electronic collection of serial publications—similar to the collections of printed books and serials that libraries have traditionally acquired. What are important are the serial titles. Consequently, this world view insists that once money has changed hands, what is purchased cannot be changed. When we pay for printed serial titles we expect to get what we pay for. Once we plunk our \$559.91 down for *Books In Print*, we expect to get it and our serials vendor is not free to substitute some other title that provides monographic author and title information.

For the information broker (perhaps nonexistent as yet outside of the publishing community), Congressional Universe is a database that is composed of data which just

happens to come from serial publications. What are important are the data, not the serial titles. Consequently, this world view allows for the substitution of serial titles just so long as the information obtained is comparable.

Since the logic employed by non-mercantile librarians insists that you get what you pay for, they are not moved by the argument that since new serial titles are added to the database all of the time for which no extra fees are levied, nor should the cost of the database be reduced when other titles are removed. They paid for a Lexus and a fleet of Kias will not do.

This same logic carries over into the eternal licensing argument. Unless the publisher will sign an agreement that the non-mercantile librarian's library will have eternal access to the electronic serial title, there will be no signature on the licensing agreement. No matter that the reason for canceling the title would in and of itself signify the lack of value, if it has been paid for, irrespective of the value of the information, the library must have eternal access. No matter that the publisher wouldn't stop publishing the title as long as it was fiscally sound, this world view requires that the publisher agree to somehow set aside money to cover the cost of eternal access even after the publication is ended. No matter that receiving the data in some format that would have to be eternally refreshed (losing 1-2%

of the data each time) would be the equivalent of being cursed with an eternal plague upon each of our houses, we insist upon eternal access.

I think it is time that we seriously reconsider the question, what business are we in? (Yes, I realize that this is not a new question, but given the situation we are in, posing and seeking answers to it is still a valid activity).

In the beginning, people wanted information. Books, and later, journals, were employed to provide that information. Yet, it is information that most of our users want, not books and journals. They come with questions, and we give them books and journals to read to find the answers. As we have begun to buy digital books and journals (or accept them as gifts) we have maintained this book and journal mentality. Now when people come to us with questions, we seamlessly hook them to the URLs of digital books and journals.

Many librarians viewed Congressional Universe as a package of digital serials that we had bought and paid for via a national license agreement. So when the publisher dropped some content, and added some other, we yelled "thief!" While denying the epithet, rather than go to court over it, the publisher agreed to a partial refund per the original license agreement.

I believe we need to seriously think about extending the "just in time, not just in case" mentality and accept the need to purchase access to databases (or paying dues to cooperatives that assemble large databases) of research reports, what we formally called journal articles—perhaps even research monographs. This will mean that we will be

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*Boxed Facts excerpted from
Nat Bodian's The Joy of
Publishing, available from Open
Horizons Publishing Co., PO
Box 205, Fairfield, Iowa 52556.*

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tive means to deliver quality education to students. However, we may be replacing the clash of business goals of efficiency and effectiveness with intellectual goals of academic freedom, creativity, and the personal touch that invigorate research and teaching. Until there is a formula for fairness for compensation to all the parties and perhaps a different definition of the academic enterprise, there may not be a resolution.

Many universities have intellectual property policies that explicitly state the terms and conditions of ownership of intellectual property, including the terms of sharing royalties

on patents and trademarks. Some institutions are revisiting their policies in relation to course work and other intellectual property to debate who really should own materials created with institutional resources. Obviously any change in the relationship of the institution as employer to the faculty/staff as employee will undoubtedly have profound implications on important principles such as academic freedom.

Nowhere in this debate have I seen proposals on how authors, institutions, and publishers should determine the economic value of intellectual property. Are concerns over the risk of copying and misuse justified? Are online courses really effective and marketable? Are we going through a lot of turmoil for little gain?

Ironically this debate is developing in tandem with the call for authors to retain rights instead of giving them to publishers. Many of the same issues have arisen in this debate: rights management, rights in any and all formats, author or institution as owner, and licensing.

Finally, librarians need to be as cognizant as teaching faculty of their rights regarding the intellectual property they create. I'm not talking about just articles or books, but any material created in support of library programs, including but not limited to bibliographic instruction materials, Internet guides, policies, bibliographies, and Web pages. If you were to leave your institution, do you know whether you have the right to take your creations with you and use them at your next place of employment?

Publisher Bestsellers — American Geophysical Union

Column editor: **Julia A. Gammon** (University of Akron) <jgammon@uakron.edu>

Cynthia Giles, Publications and Membership Marketing Coordinator of the American Geophysical Union, provided this column of their most popular titles along with some information about the organization. Take a look and see which of these bestsellers you are missing.

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paying for information as it is needed and used. It will also mean that we won't be buying as much cellulose to mark, park, circulate, repair, and reformat.

It is tempting to contemplate the thought that the current fiscal crisis produced by collecting of name-brand print serials will go away, if we began buying just the information we needed. However, I am not sanguine about this possibility. Publishers will seek to maintain their revenue streams, and we are likely to pay just as much as in the past. Hopefully, however, we will get more of the right information than at the present.

Our business is giving people the information they need to meet their intellectual content needs. We have up until now been in the book and serial collecting business, and we will continue to buy mountains of seldom-used printed information. We just can't afford to let our past fixation with this familiar and comfortable format cloud our vision of what our mission needs to be, both now and in the future.

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