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Issues in Vendor Library Relations -- Hype

by Bob Nardini (Senior Vice President & Head Bibliographer, YBP Library Services) <nardini@ybp.com>

Hype and pornography have a lot in common. Most people you ask wouldn’t have much good to say about either one, but both surround us, so there must be people who don’t object. Both attract, and both repel. Both are big business. And both are hard to define. “I know it when I see it,” Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s famous words about pornography, in a case about a French film in Ohio, would have worked as well if the justices had been attempting to define the limits of hype.

He knew it when he saw it in 1964, the date of the Court’s opinion. Would Stewart, who died in 1985, have been so certain if he were writing in 2002? Maybe he’d have said exactly the same thing; but chances are some part of the “it” he knew he could spot in 1964, he’d today let pass as entertainment, or commerce, or art. Boundaries changed, and Stewart would have changed with them.

The word was not in circulation in 1964, but we were beginning to learn about the practice of hype. Beatlemania broke out. Andy Warhol had recently painted Marilyn Monroe. Cassius Clay boasted he’d beat Sonny Liston for the heavyweight title, and did. These were all surprises, notable because they were such departures from what anyone had seen before. They stuck out, marvelous individual efforts each. Hype had not as yet been commodified, professionalized, and modularized, as today, when hype is landscapes, like muzak, one track impossible to recall the instant the next has begun. Today, personal projects in boastfulness or excess would hardly weigh up on the scale as hype at all. Our hype is institutionalized exaggeration, corporate work, planned and sustained, mapped out with monastic discipline and military precision.

The library community was surprised a few years ago to find itself the target of a serious and custom-made operation in hype. This had not happened before. When compared with many other walks of life, the stakes are modest in the library world. No one had previously seen a profit in the considerable effort and expense of a classy hype campaign aimed at libraries. Not, that is, before 1999 and the launch of netLibrary.

NetLibrary had $120 million from investors, netLibrary eBooks, and netLibrary had the idea that they could create...continued on page 79
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Hype
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to all of our customers, publishers, partners and friends for your notes, calls, and continuing expressions of encouragement and support.”

When the mighty fall, encouragement and support rarely are the only feelings expressed. Many bystanders enjoyed the show, and with Goliath already on the turf, Davids everywhere loaded up their slingshots. At a certain point, it was suddenly natural to talk dismissively about eBooks, to say they “weren’t ready,” to refer to the printed book as an unsurpassed technology platform, and to roll
the eyes at the very mention of netLibrary.

“What? You mean the people in marketing were wrong?” was one facetious librarian header for a posting on eBooks. “What a shock, marketing people over hyping something.”

But it hadn’t been only the marketing people on this one. Anybody with anything to do with eBooks, it had seemed, briefly, was fully credentialed to offer forecasts at any time and in any medium on the future of the book (none too rosy, in some of them, for the print variety), on reading, education, publishing, scholarship, libraries. The virtual podium got awfully crowded. netLibrary was hardly out there alone.

Should netLibrary have done it differently? Could they have promoted their eBooks patiently and quietly, getting to know the market with shoe leather and old-fashioned sales calls, with business cards left on desks, mornings of phone calls, lunch with top prospects? “We think our eBooks might interest you,” the netLibrary representative suggests to the librarian, as a waitress departs with order in hand. Then the next call, then write up the day’s reports at night, then another day just like it tomorrow.

Their investors must wish that netLibrary had done it mostly that way. Which of the rest of us, though, would really have preferred for netLibrary to build up the business like some beloved mom-and-pop outfit? Universities, after all, are hardly innocents when it comes to hype. Who didn’t enjoy the show? Who wasn’t flattered to have such a good ticket for a major production in hype like netLibrary staged? Who didn’t feel they were witnessing something big, were even a part of it? Who doesn’t think netLibrary gave it a good go?

And who wasn’t half scared to death, for a little while, that the future had come and gone, and pitilessly had left the slow sitting by, carelessly of dusty and undisturbed

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Bet You Missed It

Press Clippings — In the News — Carefully Selected by Your Crack Staff of News Sleuths

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JAPANESE LIBRARIES JOLTED
by Pamela M. Rose (University at Buffalo)

Escalating subscription prices (nothing new to U.S. libraries) combined with unfavorable exchange rates and decentralized collection development have hit Japanese libraries hard. Additional institutional challenges, such as the specter of sudden gaps in journal runs due to individual professors canceling their subscriptions and multiple individual departmental libraries, mean the extent of the crisis remains to be discovered. Officials are hoping to take advantage of cheaper online access and joint bargaining power to reduce subscription costs.


IN NICHE AD SALES, THE SKY’S THE LIMIT
by Bruce Strauss (The Citadel)

Magazines are dying in batches, but Vulcan Media’s 30 titles are thriving. Publishing niches target an audience for advertisers, and Vulcan plays to this with six outdoor publications and a grab-bag of others like Heavy Equipment News.

Vulcan’s founder Douglas Moore went from mobile home sales to Randall Publishing’s trucking and construction magazines. “I learned I’d rather sell sky than gadgets,” he says.


UPPING THE TENURE ANTE
by Phil Dankert (Cornell University)

In this Point of View article the author expresses his concern over the “publish or perish” model that exists in academe today. Junior faculty members have to publish more and more these days in order to get tenure. “When someone six years out of graduate school is expected to have written two books...the system has gone beyond absurdity and approaches farce. Aspiring professors may one day have to start roughing out their future books while still in primary school.” This coupled with the fact that university presses, primarily for economic reasons, oppose multiple submission of manuscripts causes problems for junior faculty (“It’s simply not fair to punish the victims of inflated expectations by making it harder for them to do their jobs in the limited time allotted.”). A suggestion for dealing with this situation is proposed.


LATTES AND LEARNING
by Phil Dankert (Cornell University)

Although much of what is presented in this article should come as no surprise to librarians, it is still interesting to learn what some university libraries are doing to bring students back. These days, more and more of them “are entering libraries not through turnstiles but through phone lines and fibre-optic cables.” What might be called the “Barnes & Noble Model” — plush chairs, double mocha lattes, book groups, and even music — seems to be working at some colleges. The big question is whether the dollars invested helps students to learn. There is also disagreement among scholars about what the rise of databases means for scholars. As more and more materials go online there is going to be less and less use of the “bricks-and-mortar library.” Is this a bad thing? Some would argue that there are “real problems when students aren’t touching books and taking them off the shelves.” They are troubled by the way students are using information from the Internet. Finally, if trends show that more and more of the information that people need will be on the desktop, what kind of place will the library be in 20 years?


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NUCLEAR KNOWLEDGE
by Sandy Beehler (Lewis & Clark College)

Preserving knowledge about nuclear weapons may seem a dubious goal to some, but it could prove crucial to the U.S.‘s defenses — an uncertain future that includes rogue nations with nuclear arsenals. In addition to the problem of maintaining millions of paper documents and thousands of electronic files, there is the problem of passing on the knowledge that is held only in the heads of an aging population of nuclear weapons scientists. To address these problems, the U.S. is mounting both digitizing projects and training programs to ensure this information will be available to future generations.

See — “This is Not a Test” in Wired 10.03 (March 2002).

LIFE AFTER THE PROPAGANDA MILL
by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

The Russian intelligentsia makes a come-back for big bucks and the status it brings. In a Moscow dominated by nouveau riches capitalists, the eggheads mop at destitute squalor. Then Grigory Chkhartshili created a 19th-century gentleman sleuth and suddenly found he had foreign language deals, movies and a T.V. series. This was followed by Tatiana Tolstaya’s experimental novel Kys and Aleksei Slapovsky’s T.V. screenplays, until there are as many as ten (!) authors pulling down 100 to 500K a year.

Chkhartshili was previously employed translating Japanese and paddling with a magnumopus “The Writer and Suicide.” Enjoying nothing so much as a good walk in a graveyard, he got the idea of his Slavic Sherlock Holmes living in what Russians now regard as a Chekovian golden age. Now a nine book superstar, he has T-shirts and a cologne named for his hero for sale online. And a new Peugeot in the drive. But he still thinks in terms of Five-Year Plans.


ENGINEERED EVERGLADES ECOLOGY
by Sandy Beehler (Lewis & Clark College)

It’s an interesting question: can a vast and unique ecological system, brought to the brink of ruin by human progress, be saved from ruin without endangering that progress and the human beings it sustains? This article provides a fascinating overview of what ecologists are attempting to achieve in the Florida Everglades. The plan calls for a gradual restoration of the original hydrological systems that sustained this huge wetlands area—including freeing the Kissimmee River from its man-made banks, storage of potential flood waters in underground wells, and creation of a marshland to filter pollutants from water flowing into the park area.

See — “Re-engineering the Everglades” Wired 10.02 (February 2002).

LET THEM EAT TOAST
by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

Napster’s been K.O’d, but music thieving teens are still at it in a major way. Roxio produces 70% of the CD “burner” software which is cutely named “Toast.” And Roxio lusters to branch out into phots, video and DVDs. But the music empire has struck back with CDs that can’t be copied.

Roxio is striving to convince the industry that burning is a positive thing for them. They’re only showing a profit on 10% of new music releases anyhow. So why keep backlogs of music inventory that will never sell?

EMI has been won over. For a fee, users can burn music from Roxio’s Website. The biz plan? Make legit burning easier than stealing.


shelves of printed books? All the hype had one sure effect: nobody wanted to be that. The hype threw a spotlight and cast an interrogation lamp too. What was your library doing? Lots of libraries took up with netLibrary and bought some eBooks. They learned in a hurry — this was not a distance education opportunity — and figured out how to use them, how to catalog them, how to promote them, how to integrate them into everything else the library was doing. There were some real successes.

Librarians learned a lot about eBooks. Some things they learned were, that there weren’t very many of them, that the use model was restrictive, that they were not a bargain, that there were preservation questions, and above all that their patrons’ degree of urgency about the need for eBooks was well below that of people in the industry. The hype had been a good teacher.

Should netLibrary have done it differently? Should Clay have been polite to Liston? That would have disappointed everyone, probably even Liston. But Muhammad Ali always knew something that netLibrary now knows too. If you enter the ring with hype, you’d better win.