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Reference Purchasing: When Once Is Not Enough

by John Schmitt (Regis University Libraries, Denver CO) <jschmitt@regis.edu>

Librarians occupy a funny niche. Our public image is that of conscientious collectors and archivists who buy everything, classify and catalog it, and then shelve it in a place where it will be preserved for the ages. The reality is that we frequently pay for things without due regard for value; we lease almost as much as we buy; a large part of our budget goes for services; the larger part of our electronic holdings is not cataloged; and users who look for the goods on our shelves are missing the material we rent from publishers.

This all used to be very rational. Books are recognizable objects which are routinely ordered, added, and paid for. When parts of library collections began to move to an electronic format there was universal acclaim because of the increased utility of the product. No more explaining what those abbreviations stand for in the *MLA International Bibliography*. No balancing the index of *Index Medicus* on one knee while turning pages in the volume with the actual citations. Multiple years, even decades of research could be searched in one sweep. Updated electronic editions rolled in quickly and turnaround time on indexing became rapid. Even better was the ubiquitous nature of digital information. One license agreement and an entire IP range was enabled, maybe more.

What has happened? Electronic reference publishing has gained a momentum of its own and librarians speak glowingly of access more than volumes, of leases rather than collections. We've been encouraged in this by almost all of our constituencies. University administrators and library trustees radiate enthusiasm for how their libraries have moved into the 21st century and now offer services at any distance and at any hour. The few dissenters tend to be those faculty who recognize that a printed book is hard to match for an extended intellectual argument and thorough documentation.

The enthusiasm has reached a point where librarians and publishers gleefully join hands to buy and sell the same product again and again in different formats. A case in point is the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In 1989 most reference departments paid \$3,000 for the *OED 2*, a magnificent set which updated the 1933 edition, plus four later supplements. Electronic momentum, or E-mo as I call it, has led librarians to decide that while a prestigious title in the reference collection is good, two versions of the same work is better. It has cachet. It catches the eye on the library's home page. People might want to try it out just for the novelty of searching our greatest dictionary in a Web version.

Nor are researchers immune to E-mo. I am familiar with one linguistics professor who ardently recommended the library acquire the *OED Online*. He conjured up persuasive arguments, none of which I disagreed with. When I spoke to him personally, I learned he hadn't actually looked at it, though he was aware we had an ongoing trial. One could argue that this is irrelevant since he was already deeply familiar with the dictionary. But those of us who are stewards of finite budgets strive to make our resources stretch farther. Duplicating earlier purchases is not how this is accomplished.

Why do we feel we must have the *OED* online? Students and scholars don't use it to look up "diss" or "terabyte," but rather to figure out what Shakespeare meant when Hamlet speaks of "The undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns." The pre-1950 portion of the *OED* vastly exceeds the words that have entered the language in most of our lifetimes, yet we feel that unless we get regular updates of this great dictionary, we're just not on top of the history of

the language. We're not talking about the latest digital neologism here, but rather a rich, millennium-long tradition shaped by Anglo-Saxon, Norman French, Latin, Gaelic, and a hundred other sources. Why on earth do we need monthly updates?

Remember that \$3,000 expenditure in 1989? Barnes and Noble, and probably others, are now selling the same print edition for \$900. If your faculty complain that the library is too inconvenient to look up an etymology or your branch library informs you they need the *OED*, buy them a complete set of the print product. It's almost equivalent to the cost of one year's lease on the online version, and it contains every pre-1990 word, definition, etymology, and quotation that the online product carries. With the third edition slated for 2010, it probably won't take long for online subscribers to exceed the combined cost of the 1989 and the 2010 editions.

Of course, many objections can be lodged. Is the dictionary hard to use? Not if you know the alphabet. Don't they use abbreviations, like OF and ME? Yes, but so does the online *OED*. You have to look them up in either case and once you've learned they stand for "Old French" or "Middle English," you're unlikely to forget. But users can't cut and paste from the print version. No, but why would they want to, anyway? This is a dictionary, not the Gettysburg Address.

Ah ha, I know, they can't use your print version to search out all words English has borrowed from Catalan. You're absolutely right. That goes for Basque, too. I won't ask "why is this necessary?" I realize that a question like that is frequently followed by someone asking for exactly that kind of information. It's in the nature of reference work to prepare for one type of search, then be asked for a different approach to the same topic. Searching in and sorting on less-used

fields is an advantage for online sources. But does this justify every library forking over annual lease payments? Does every library need this?

If you don't have a book that someone wants, you request it through interlibrary loan. Relying on commonly held resources has proven to be enormously cost-effective and multiplied the utility of our collections. Why can't it be that way with a source such as the *OED*? If one library in an area subscribed to the electronic version, a capable ILL staffer could print out or possibly e-mail every English word that comes from Catalan (there are 11). Oxford's license is unlikely to prohibit this use so long as you aren't trying to build your own mini-*OED* and resell it.

In fairness, one area where an electronic alternative is desirable is distance education. These students frequently labor at a disadvantage to those with ready access to both electronic and print collections. If they are engaged in the study of word origins or the history of the language, they should have access to a product like this. The case is even more compelling if the academic library receives funds from revenues generated by the distance education program.

But if you set aside the debating points for a moment, I believe Electronic Momentum is more likely to be the rationale for acquiring such a source. It won't be articulated that way, but the tide of electronic access is a hard one to swim against, even when you're duplicating material that already resides in your collection. It's often a subconscious cultural decision which is made with little debate. You may as well ask "why don't we all write with fountain pens anymore?"

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The case is aptly seen in other online products known more for their historic value, not their current additions. Oxford recently began marketing the *American National Biography*, an impressive scholarly set if ever there was one. If you have already purchased the print edition, why would you need to duplicate it? Is information about deceased Americans growing at an accelerating rate? Oxford's Karen Casey points out that DNA testing brought out new information on Thomas Jefferson's offspring after the print entry appeared. This will be reflected in the electronic copy of the *ANB*. But realistically, most dead people have stopped adding to their *resumes*. (Poor Zachary Taylor: despite the indignity of being exhumed, the forensic evidence failed to elevate his place in the American presidency or suggest a conspiracy to poison him.)

The *ANB* decided to demarcate the cut-off point for new entries (new dead, if you will), and chose 1996. Now, 1996 is a good year. It's not round like 2000, but it is quite late in the century and most people will be able to rely on it for information from the 16th century through almost all of the 20th. It might inconvenience print users to learn that Fred Astaire (d. 1988) is there, but Gene Kelly (d. 1998) is not, but does this require us to lease what we already own? Isn't one format enough? To be fair it should be pointed out that the *ANB* is adding about 125 entries each quarter. But aren't there other retrospective analyses of Gene Kelly we can rely on? Will the *ANB* be the only acceptable source? Does anyone doubt that Oxford will bring out supplementary volumes? Different libraries will have different takes on this question and the argument could be illuminating to all of us. What is troubling is the fact that the debate does not occur at all.

This seems to be an enormous blind spot for many in collection development. The cultural assumption is that print is old and fixed; digital is current and transforming. Print is staid; digital is sexy. Print requires us to look things up; digital is interactive and evokes the "aha!" response when we find something.

I admit to feeling all these emotions. I spend a significant amount of time evaluating new databases and promising Web sites of potential use to my institution's clientele. And my natural instinct would lead me to spend more time trying out the *OED* online than I would ever spend browsing the pages of its 20 hefty volumes. But browsing is not research. Enjoying the interactive nature of the product is not the same as extracting scholarly content. The undeniable fact is that when we duplicate what we have already purchased, we have made a choice not to buy something we don't already own. Our collections become shallower, less diverse, less well-rounded.

Thanks to E-mo, we have fallen into the trap of believing that if one copy of a major reference work is good, two copies are better. If the second copy is electronic, it seems there is almost no justification required, no review necessary. If you object, you might be looked on as a technophobe. Even the reviews rarely ask "do you really need this?" They are rife with descriptions of drop down menus, frames,

links, exportable formats, and boolean operators, but they almost never ask "why was this product rolled out?" Reviewers rarely concern themselves with questions external to the product immediately in front of them, but it is these reviews that directly influence buying decisions. It appears to be a given that publishers act in the better interests of librarians; that librarians spend collection development dollars in ways that benefit all their users; and that the question of "need" is relative.

While I have used two recent products from Oxford's distinguished line, there are other reference publishers such as Gale, Grove and ISI which are reselling far more expensive reference works in business, the humanities and the sciences. Libraries made very large allocations to lease ISI's *Web of Science*, despite having previously purchased print indexes, multi-year cumulations, and CD-ROMs. Now ISI has an arrangement that allows libraries to "license" the data, not just "lease" it, for an additional 20%. Licensing is a practice which allows libraries to keep the file and the search software if they should ever decide to cancel the subscription. There is also a one-time fee to repurchase old files of ISI's databases. Anecdotal evidence has placed this cost in the six-figure range. All of the above publishers would claim some enhancement in their online products, but it's hard not to argue that they're also rejuvenating the revenue stream of an existing title.

In fact, publishers have various product lines that they want to sell and resell, much like a movie which has a theatrical release, a video release, and a television premiere. In the case of the *OED*, librarians are entreated to buy the 20-volume print edition, the 2-volume *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, the CD-ROM edition, and the *OED Online*. When sales slacken for one format, newer, "irresistible" versions are rolled out. This is the nature of the reference product cycle. But that does not necessarily mean it corresponds to the enduring needs of scholars, researchers, and other information consumers.

Let's return to that quote from *Hamlet*. The full passage runs like this:

The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
...And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry

The "bourn" is a boundary or perimeter, according to the *OED*, and a unique Shakespearean construction. The traveller could well be a library user in search of undiscovered learning. For librarians the "bourn" could represent the limits of our judgment which lead us to buy those names we already know ("bear those ills we have") rather than seek out "the undiscover'd country" of new, significant, and timely sources a good collection really needs. Let's acknowledge the unique value electronic reference products offer. But let's also find the courage to resist the Electronic Momentum which puzzles the will and turns awry smart decisions.

Rumors

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including books, music and video—in this new standardized format," she said. "Many of the leading publishers are ready to send ONIX International data to their customers," reported BISG Executive Director, Sandra Paul. The list includes: Harcourt, HarperCollins, Houghton Mifflin, McGraw-Hill, National Book Network, Paladin Press, Pearson, Princeton University Press, Random House, Inc., Time Warner Trade Publishing, John Wiley & Sons, and Yale University Press. In addition

to the two major e-tailers, other organizations prepared to accept ONIX International data include: the American Bookseller's Association BookSense Website, Baker & Taylor, R. R. Bowker, Follett, Ingram, Login Brothers Book Company in the US (and their Ernesto Reichmann Distribuidora de Livros Ltd. in Brazil), MUZE, NetRead, and Reiter's Books. This will be the subject of a panel at the Charleston Conference and, guess what?, Cindy Cunningham—who is quite something, you will love her—from Amazon.com will be speaking in Charleston! Y'all always said you wanted some-

one from Amazon.com! We aim to please!

Will your eBook have an ISBN? The U.S. ISBN Agency has released a position paper on the issues facing ISBN in the digital world. Entitled *The Digital World and the Ongoing Development of ISBN*, the document is a culmination of many months of discussions with industry experts aimed at helping identify and proposing ways of dealing with such issues. The document is available on the Agency Website at <http://www.isbn.org/> or at <http://www.bowker.com/standards>.

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