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What Were They Thinking? The Oxford English Dictionary on the Web

by David Tyckoson (Head of Reference, Henry Madden Library, California State University – Fresno) <davety@csufresno.edu>

It has happened to us many times before. A publisher takes an established print source, develops a new version for the electronic environment, saturates the scholarly world with advertising, and expects libraries to purchase the new product. And as good librarians, we *do* want to purchase the product. In nearly every case, the electronic version provides a number of clear advantages over its print equivalent. Better searching capabilities, more timely content, and remote access for users are just a few of the features that appeal to us. We have watched – and participated in – the transformation of many of our favorite reference sources as they moved from a print to an electronic environment. From old favorite bibliographic databases (ERIC and Medline) to fulltext electronic journals (IDEAL, Muse, JSTOR) to standard reference works (Britannica, Occupational Outlook Handbook, World Fact Book, Bartlett's Quotations) to the latest e-book craze, we have seen, bought, and serviced several generations of electronic information products. As librarians and publishers, we should all be used to this process by now. So when I learned about the new Web version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), I was understandably excited. Here was a timeless reference classic moving into the world of the 21st century. I had visions of students and faculty checking word origins at 3:00am to answer important research questions and bar bets. Yet when I found out how this resource was being priced, I felt that something was drastically off of kilter. What went wrong here?

Perhaps I was just taken aback because I had such high expectations for this source. After all, this is *THE OED*, one of the most respected reference works ever published. The *Oxford English Dictionary* is the result of one of the most remarkable scholarly undertakings in history. It is a highly successful product that has become a standard part of every reference collection. In his book *Distinguished Classics of Reference Publishing*, Jim Rettig refers to the OED as the "Jewel in the Crown" – a status with which I and many other reference librarians heartily agree. The OED has served as the definitive etymological dictionary for over a century and there is no indication that this status will change in the centuries to come. No other reference source has the staying power of the OED. No, it is not the content of the OED that is causing my distress.

Nor is it the technology. By all accounts,

the Web version of the OED is at least as good as the two print editions. The Web interface is relatively easy to use, material is updated on an ongoing basis, and patrons do not need to walk into the library to be able to use it. Whereas users of the print editions are forced to look only under the word being defined as a point of access, the Web version allows for keyword searching anywhere in an entry. This feature allows the user to quickly and easily find all occurrences of a word, whether it is in the main entry for the term or buried within the definition of another word. Since the OED contains one of the world's largest collections of English-language quotations, the Web version may also serve as an encyclopedia of quotations as well as a dictionary. While these quotations are all included in the print edition, the user of the electronic version will find more quotations and will find them faster. From the viewpoint of the technology, the electronic version of the OED is clearly the better product.

The electronic version also eliminates problems related to physical access to the information. With the Web and proper authentication techniques, patrons have anytime/anywhere access to the database. With remote access, patrons no longer need to walk into the library to use the OED. A faculty member may log on from her office or a student may log on from his dorm room or apartment. Students involved in distance learning classes have equal access to those in residence at the main campus. Remote access such as this is clearly a benefit of the electronic environment.

My problem with the OED is not due to any lack of planning on the part of the publisher. In fact, if anyone can be praised for

long-term planning, it is the Oxford University Press. Oxford took over the publication of the dictionary in 1879, twenty-two years after the project was first proposed. To their credit, they stuck with it for another fifty-four years until the first edition was finally finished in 1933. Recognizing the continual evolution of the language, they then embarked on another half-century of work on the second edition, which was not published until 1989. Not content to rest on these laurels, a representative from Oxford University Press announced at a meeting during the 1999 ALA conference in New Orleans (Reference Classics Go Online, sponsored by *Reference Books Bulletin*) that the third edition is scheduled for completion some time around 2010. While it seems as though every other publisher is milking their products for every dime that they can get, Oxford is willing to make a very long-term investment in the name of scholarship. Without a publisher who was willing to take an attitude such as this, the dictionary never would have been completed in the first place. OUP deserves recognition for its long term vision and responsibility to the academic community.

Everything about the OED on the Web is good – except the pricing formula. Something about the way that the publisher has chosen to charge for access to the OED rubs me in a very wrong way. When OUP first announced that the OED was going onto the Web, they had yet to decide on a pricing algorithm. While they clearly had a great product, they had no idea how to charge us for its use. They advertised the coming product to libraries and faculty, but could not tell us how much it would cost. What they finally de-

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Sidebar 1 — What else can I do with my money?

I know of no libraries that have an unlimited budget. When I look at a new subscription, I always think about what other products that funding could purchase. Looking at my \$8,500.00 price per year for the OED, I could solve my dictionary problems in a number of other creative means:

- purchase 5 or 6 print sets of the second edition of the OED every year. These sets could be placed in dorm lounges and academic departments. After four years, I would have installed copies of the OED in all of the logical places where it might be used on a regular basis.
- buy another set of the second edition for the library (\$1,500.00) and hire a student to copy and fax entries for any affiliated user requesting such information. This satisfies remote access issues.
- buy 425 copies of the *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (\$20.00 each) and give them away to anyone who asks for dictionary information. This would satisfy most student's dictionary needs.

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cided upon is that there is no standard price—the cost depends on how many potential users a library has. Your mileage may vary, but the cost (as I understand it) for my library is approximately \$0.50 per student per year. While 50 cents does not sound like much, my university currently enrolls about 17,000 students. Doing the math, my campus would pay \$8,500 per year for access to the *OED* on the Web.

(For other options on how this money might be spent, see Sidebar 1.)

At first glance, this does not sound too bad. In fact, it is almost exactly what we were paying for the *Britannica* before they moved to free access. This is not surprising, since *OED* used the *Britannica* model when deciding on their own pricing scheme. Since *Britannica* and the *OED* are both considered classic reference works, does a similar pricing mechanism make sense? I must answer that it does not – and not just because *Britannica* recently abandoned this pricing structure. Per capita pricing simply does not make sense for a work such as the *OED*.

As I see it, there are three problems with this pricing structure for this product. The first is the underlying assumption that cost should be based on the *total* number of *potential* users. While that cost is arguably low (\$0.50), it does not address the reality of the use of such a reference work. In my experience, the most intensive users of the *OED* are a few select faculty in the English Department who use it regularly in their research. Ironically, since pricing is based on student population, these heavy users are not even considered in setting the cost. I suppose that the assumption is that the number of intensive faculty users is directly proportional to the total student body, but I do not believe that this is entirely accurate. For example, a small department whose members are intensively involved in linguistics will make heavier use of the *OED* than a large department whose focus is creative writing. Student body size is not a good predictor of fac-

ulty use. The next heaviest users of the *OED* are a few select graduate students in the English Department, who are most often working under the direction of those same select faculty. On my campus, I can count on one hand the number of graduate students who fall into this category. Undergraduate students, who comprise the biggest potential group of users, are the least likely to actually use the *OED*. Most undergraduates only search the *OED* for class assignments. The simple fact is that most of the population on my campus will never use the *OED* – and I do not want to have to pay annually for their non-use of the product.

The second problem with this pricing structure is that it is an annual fee. As is true for many electronic products, when we contract with OUP for the *OED* we are leasing the information rather than buying it. If we do not renew the lease, access is removed and we have absolutely nothing to show for our investment. Since library budgets suffer from the ups and downs of the budget of the institutions that they serve, it is quite possible that a rather large expenditure such as the *OED* could be the target of budget cuts in the future. Should this happen, the library would be able to retain none of the information for which it has already paid. In contrast, every academic library in the country still retains the first and second print editions on their shelves. There is no annual charge for retention. Even if a library cannot afford to buy supplements, the base set is always available for users. The current *OED* pricing structure requires us to re-purchase the base information every year.

The third problem is the relation of the annual cost to the updating of the product. With something like the *OED*, the vast majority of the content of the work does not change. Yes, there are new words added to the language and, yes, researchers uncover earlier uses of words already in the dictionary, but in most cases the content is quite stable. One reason that libraries keep the first and second edition is that they are still valuable and revered scholarly sources. A century and a half after work started on the

Sidebar 2 — The *OED* on CD-ROM

The Web version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* does not mark the first attempt to sell this reference work electronically. In 1988, Oxford University Press released a CD-ROM version of the first edition of the *OED*. According to the Reference Books Bulletin section of Booklist, this version “is a complicated, sophisticated system that requires patience and perseverance to search with precision and effectiveness.” In other words, it was very difficult to use and thus did not ever really catch on with libraries. Oxford learned a lot from that first experiment in electronics. The Web version is much more intuitive and user-friendly. On the other hand, the CD-ROM was sold for a one-time fixed price of \$950.00.

Oxford English Dictionary, scholars still use most of the information contained in the original work. No other reference source has such a long time frame of retention of its contents.

While updating does in fact occur, the updated entries reflect a very small percentage of the total work. The second edition contains approximately 500,000 entries for words, of which 5,000 were new to that edition. Given that 50 years elapsed between publication of the first and second editions, these 5,000 new words represent an average addition rate of 100 words per year, or a growth rate of 0.02% per year. The preface to the third edition indicates that to date 1,045 entries have been revised since the second edition, which by my calculations continues the rate of revision of approximately 100 entries per year. If we assume that the annual cost of the subscription goes to update the entries in the work, I find that I am paying \$85.00 for every new or revised entry.

In most electronic products, it is the *new* material that is the most valuable to the user and an annual subscription to obtain that information makes sense. With the *OED*, it is the *old* material that is most valuable to the user. OUP needs to develop a pricing structure that reflects this fact. Instead of an annual subscription, I offer the following suggestions:

1. Institute a one-time purchase price. Charge us for the content, not the format. This is what is done with the print and what was done with the CD-ROM (see Sidebar 2). Just as we pay one price for print editions, we should pay once for purchase of the Web edition (maybe around \$5,000.00). Libraries can handle one-time large purchases much more

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Sidebar 3 – Taking Direct Action

Maybe it is time for us to take another approach with publishers. If a vendor is going to continue to charge us by the total number of potential users of a system, then let's try to maximize that usage. In the spirit of the teach-ins of the 60s or the World Trade Organization protests of the 90s, we could ask our users to take direct action by using a specific product at a specific time on a specific date. For example, we could try to hold an “*OED* Fest” in which every one of our users would log on to the dictionary at the same time. We could even sponsor contests to see who could find certain definitions or quotations and give away prizes for the fastest response or most creative uses of the database. Of course, most vendors would have difficulty handling tens of thousands of simultaneous logins, but that would be part of the protest. We all saw what happened to *Britannica* after they decided to open up free access. If we are paying for thousands of users for a product, then let's get them using it!

easily than ongoing subscription costs. Since there would also be a cost to OUP to provide Web access, a small ongoing access charge would also be reasonable (\$100 per year). The key here is to charge once for the content rather than requiring us to repurchase the same material year after year.

2. Charge for the updates separately from the cost for the main body of the dictionary. Most users are not looking for the revisions—they are looking for the material that was in the first and second editions. Charging an optional subscription fee for those that do want access to the revised entries (\$1000 per year) would give every library the ability to select what parts of the product best fit their users needs.

3. If the product must be sold solely on a subscription basis, charge on the basis of simultaneous rather than potential use. Set up a fee per simultaneous user and let each library subscribe at the level that best meets their needs. On my campus of 17,000 students, I doubt that more than four would ever want to use the *OED* at the same time. If I had the option of buying a subscription for just four users (even at \$500.00 each) instead of 17,000, I would be much more inclined to purchase the Web version.

These pricing problems exist for other products, so why pick on the *OED*? There is no doubt that *OED* is an essential part of any reference collection. It is the only reference source whose longevity is measured in centuries rather than months or years. The editors at the *OED* are motivated more by scholarship than profit, which has become very rare for any publishing house. However, they have not thought through the implications of per capita pricing for this kind of reference work. Oxford has the opportunity to take a leadership role in the pricing of scholarly reference information. Through some creative input, the *OED* can become an example of new pricing mechanisms rather than merely another application of a pricing system developed for different types of products. I am hopeful that the editors of the *OED* will take up this challenge and develop a new method for pricing this priceless information. I really would like to buy the *OED* on the Web, but I cannot afford it in its existing configuration.

(For a more radical solution, see Sidebar 3)

Creating a Greek Approval Plan at Yale

by **Anthony J. Oddo** (Team Leader, Arts & Sciences Team, and Principal Catalog Librarian, Catalog Department, Sterling Memorial Library, High Street, Yale University, New Haven, CT 05620; phone 203-432-7961; fax 203-432-7231) <anthony.oddo@yale.edu>

Upon assuming the title and duties of selector for Greek imprint materials, I was immediately informed that it would be to my benefit to set up an approval plan with a Greek vendor. The overall goal of such a plan was to supply Yale with the newest, most scholarly published offerings at the best possible price. Encouraged by suggestions from other selectors, I thought that such a plan would be a simple task to compile, for the most part copying approval plans for other foreign countries and simply modifying them for Greece. My simple plan turned into a monumental nightmare. No approval plan had existed before I assumed these duties, and it became immediately apparent that before I could realistically ask a vendor to supply something for my final approval, I had to assess Yale's needs.

Historically, the Greek collection development policy at Yale University has been sharply divided between ancient or classical Greek, and modern Greek. The latter begins with the medieval period and extends to the present time. Classical Greek collection development has enjoyed a long tradition of steady financial support and growth. The university has a large classical language department with a long established classics library as well as extensive holdings of classical language materials located in the Sterling Memorial Library. The collection supports the Classics Department's offerings each semester in classical Greek language and literature,

history, art history and archaeology, as well as faculty research and scholarship.

Modern Greek imprint collection development is relatively new to Yale. No formal educational programs exist in modern Greek studies at the university and, as such, collection building had been limited to securing adequate coverage of informally selected topics of modern Greek civilization to supplement research currently in progress in other disciplines. Faculty and student interest is sporadic at best. Approximately 30 years ago, my predecessor, George Vrooman, with the assistance of Mrs. Evro Layton, put together an informal and limited collection development policy to fill in gaps that appeared in the Greek imprint collection. Although not named, this informal policy became Yale's first approval plan for modern Greek imprints, an approval plan which we have attempted to duplicate without success. Evro Layton was the founder of a local co-operative buying service which supplied modern Greek titles to a number of large academic and public libraries in the US. Vrooman's initial design was to limit collection development choices to modern Greek history, literature and literary criticism, economics and economic theory, social conditions, and political science. Individual requests for materials outside the above general categories, as well as any other additional book requests, were sent to Layton directly indicating that the requested items were not to be duplicated by the approval plan. If an item was already supplied or planned for a future shipment, Layton would supply the invoice number and possible shipment date. Layton's highly efficient service also offered cataloging cards for library catalogs and out-of-print searches at a reasonable cost.

Unfortunately, upon her retirement, the program ceased its services, and collection development queries had to be made directly to Greek vendors—an increasingly difficult task. Among the greatest problems that I have experienced dealing with these vendors are their general failure to respond to inquiries and their limited in-stock offerings. Because of this poor service, I have been forced to use many alternate means for book selection, such as publisher flyers, national guides, word of mouth, etc.—in other words, an inefficient means of collection building at a major research library. I also have been forced to contact publishers individually, using e-mail, fax, and the US and Greek postal systems to or-

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Anthony Oddo Profile

Born: Hartford, Connecticut, 1947.

Education: BA, Classical Languages, Iona College; MA, Latin, Fordham University; MLS, South Connecticut State University; Certificate in Russian, Defense Language Institute—West Coast, US Army.

Career: 28 years at Yale University.

Family: Wife Rosaria, and children Anthony, Jr. and Christina.

My other life: Model railroading and coin collecting.

Favorite leisure reading: Ancient history, library history, and historical novels.