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I, User — Questians, Questians: Grunge, Bliss and a 48-Hour Free Trial

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Like many of you, we've followed Houston-based **Questia Media** with interest. Its founder **Troy Williams** began with an audacious idea: to create a Web-based core collection of 50,000 liberal arts titles (ultimately growing to 250,000) and to package it with a suite of searching, linking, and footnote-creating tools that integrate with **Word** and **WordPerfect**. In other words, a one-stop research paper-writing application—albeit one that requires more effort than those offered in classified ads at the back of *Rolling Stone*.

Questia will market itself to students as a 24x7 "supplement" to the campus library, whose troublesome operatives require time off to sleep and whose books are sometimes actually in use by another patron. In practice, it's easy to imagine **Questia** becoming an *alternative* to library use, assuming it lives up to its promise to "revolutionize the way research is conducted." At \$19.95 a month, or the value-pack version at \$149.95 a year, **Questia** could play codependent to the procrastinator and Web potato lurking within all of us.

However its business model plays out, **Questia's** central concept is a good one. But between the concept and the A+ research paper falls not only the subscription price, but our topic — the user experience. We decided to get fully into the spirit of **Questia**, by imagining ourselves to be a typical student—with a paper due tomorrow morning. It is now, like, 9PM! We have not started. **Questia** has clearly anticipated people like us, because they also offer an emergency subscription option — 48-hours for \$14.95. Since we are students, we opt instead for the 48-hour free trial.

Registration is easy and quick. Armed with our user ID, password and good intentions, we return to the search screen, but are immediately distracted by a striking Three Musketeer-like chap who is billed as the "Question Marquis." He appears to be the avatar of **Questia**, a cyber-character whose dialog is part **Christopher Walken** as the Continental Dude on *Saturday Night Live* and part **Pepe LePew**. (Opening line: "Welcome to my e-boudoir." Video option: "Watch the Marquis groove.") He doesn't seem to answer any questions, but you can download a screen-saver of him. [You think we're making this up?] A few advertisements blink tranquilly at the top of the screen: **Amazon**, **Travelocity**, **Sports Illustrated**.

Let's get that paper done. Our topic is a brief history and explanation of "grunge culture," the low-key, high-volume environment that spawned and was defined by early 90's rock bands such as **Nirvana**, **Soundgarden**, and **Mudhoney**. (We tried to get into the **Oprah** course but that was already full.) Who were the major grunge figures and what did they signify? How, if at all, did they affect individuals, society, art, and the entertainment industry?

Straight to the keyword search, right? Key in "grunge" and get no hits. Look closer. Ah, that's searching Author/Title/Subject only. Switch to Power Search, and run a full-text search, also for "grunge." This returns a surprisingly reasonable 51 hits, sorted by relevancy. All of the books were published since 1995, and many from 1999-2000, which encourages us that the grunge we're getting is the grunge we want. Our faith is tested immediately, though, as we read the first title: *The Jamesonian Unconscious: The Aesthetics of Marxist Theory*, published in 1995 by **Duke University Press**. Mystified, we click on the "display pages with keyword matches" feature, only to receive the message: "This publication is not currently available for viewing."

The next hit, *Americanization and Australia*, from **University of New South Wales Press**, does indeed have an entire chapter on Australian Grunge (which is drier than Seattle's), the entry for which includes an LC Subject Heading for Popular Culture—United States. A host of other likely tomes follow, including **Greenwood Press's** *Twentieth-Century Teen Culture*, **Oxford UP's** *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music*; **Monopoly Television: MTV's Quest to Control the Music** (**Westview**, 1996); *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference* (**Verso**, 1995); *Voyeur Nation: Media, Privacy and Peering in Modern Culture* (**Westview**, 2000); and *Total Propaganda: From Mass Culture to Popular Culture* (**Lawrence Erlbaum Associates**, 1997).

Mixed in with these skull-crushing tomes that take all the fun out of **Nirvana** and **Soundgarden** are other skull-crushing tomes that seem to have nothing to do with grunge: *To Have and To Hold: The Meaning of Ownership in the United States* (**Erlbaum**, 1997); *The Birth of Internet Marketing Communications* (**Quorum**, 2000); and perhaps most surprising *What is Dramaturgy?* (**Peter Lang**, 1995). We follow the "display pages

with keyword matches" link and indeed find the word "grunge," although in a context unrelated to music. On the same page, however, we encounter this exchange:

Actor to director: "What is a dramaturg?"

Director to actor: "He's the one who knows where the library is."

Many lament the demise of serendipity in electronic retrieval... In the **Questia** model, perhaps dramaturges are no longer needed, because the library is everywhere.

Anyway, let's look at some of these grunge books. (Now, although we're imagining ourselves to be a student with mind-boggling, MP3-downloading, university-subsidized bandwidth, we ourselves visited **Questia** on a 52K modem connection. It was a very frustrating experience, with 20-30 second waits between command and result. Users without a high-speed network connection or cable modem may get a little testy. Consider yourselves warned, and while we're at it, switch to decaf, will ya?)

White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination & Difference seemed a

likely start. We clicked with "display pages with keyword matches." A pop-up window noted "98" and "325." The Table of Contents displayed in a frame to the left of the main page. We clicked on "98," waited about 30 seconds, and got a new message box, which stated "This publication is currently unavailable for viewing." To be sure, we tried accessing it by title, with the same result.

Monopoly Television: MTV's Quest to Control the Music was next. Again we followed links to pages with keyword matches, only to learn that "this publication is not currently available for viewing." We then tried *Voyeur Nation* which indicated pages 5 and 278 contained our keyword. This time the pages were available for viewing, and we identified a lyric from **Nirvana's Kurt Cobain** ("Here we are now, entertain us") in support of an argument about the demise of conversation in the age of the image. Sweet! At this rate, we might make last call.

We used **Questia's** toolbox to highlight the passage. We opened **Word**, went back to the article, with the intention of copying two sentences into our paper as a quote in

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support of our own argument that **Kurt Cobain** was awesome. **Questia** does not permit this, a feature for which publishers rather than students will thank them. We instead re-typed the short passage, and used **Questia**'s very fine citation feature to begin a very fine bibliography. Choice of styles: **MLA**, **Chicago Manual of Style**, **Turabian**, **Harvard**, etc.

We carried on, got some context from *The Oxford History of the Twentieth Century*, considered *European Readings on* [the grunge aspect of] *American Culture* and located a novel in which the music and milieu featured prominently. Our skull was not crushed. When we concluded our overview of the social aspects of grunge, we had footnotes and a bibliography all properly cited. We stored our paper on the **Questia** site, and headed for last call at the Internet Café, where we called up our paper to show it off to our friends, who were all deeply impressed, and went off to start their own 48-hour free trials.

Questions, Questions:

1 How does a user know when **Questia** is an appropriate tool? What topics make sense to search there? Plant hybrids? No. Regulation of nuclear waste? Probably not. Election reform? Jackson Pollock? Are contemporary topics covered as well as historical topics?

2 If I were **Questia**, why wouldn't I market university-wide subscriptions to the university administration at a reduced rate, in exchange for university support?

3 If I were the university administration, why wouldn't I in turn wrap the cost of **Questia** access (as a study aid) into the cost of tuition?

4 If I were a student, why wouldn't I use my university-supplied or university-required **Questia** subscription as a first source for liberal arts topics?

5 If I were an academic librarian, especially in a large institution where undergraduates are not always well supported, why wouldn't I support **Questia** as a well-selected "virtual college library?"

6 Would a 250,000 title collection via **Questia** serve to accredit an institution that contracted **Questia** as a library?

A Library View of the SPARC Initiative

The Scholarly Publishing & Academic Resources Coalition

by **Carla Stoffle** (Dean of Libraries, University of Arizona)
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As in the game "Telephone," **SPARC**'s message sometimes gets distorted with each telling. There are those who swear that **SPARC** has declared war against all commercial publishers. Others accuse us of bandying about unproven assertions, overblown rhetoric and an ahistorical approach to publishing. Some out there have even charged us with being card-carrying followers of **Chairman Mao**.

So, comrades, as a member of **SPARC**'s Steering Committee since its inception in 1998, I set out here to remind readers of **SPARC**'s purpose and history while evaluating **SPARC**'s long-term effectiveness. Because **SPARC** is altering the way scholars and librarians think about journal publishing — and changing the culture of academic publishing in the process — it's important to set the record straight.

For the Record

Throughout the 1990s, members of the research and academic library community made many unsuccessful efforts to influence the scholarly publishing marketplace. Prices for many journals were skyrocketing annually without adequate explanations from their publishers. Eventually we realized that we would be much more effective working as a united front. So, using the **Pew Higher Education Roundtable's Policy Perspectives** ("To Publish and Perish," Special Issue, March 1998) as our intellectual launching pad, several **Association of Research Library** directors created **SPARC**. Our goal was to address the pricing practices and policies of scientific, technical and medical (STM) journals.

Simply put, **SPARC** was our response to unconscionable journal price increases and the declining influence of scholars over the future of scholarly communication.

Today, **SPARC** is an international alliance of approximately 200 universities, research libraries, and library associations. It is built as a constructive response to market dysfunction in the scholarly com-

munication system that has reduced dissemination of science and crippled libraries charged with providing up-to-date research materials, and this remains its primary focus.

Just as important, **SPARC** serves as a catalyst for action to create a system of communication that is more responsive to the needs of scholars and academe. **SPARC** members have followed through on their commitment to educate faculty on serials issues. As a result, we've seen a number of new electronic initiatives in scientific publishing get a much better reception from scholars than they would have just a few years ago. This is one of the ways we measure success.

More specifically, however, **SPARC**'s agenda focuses on enhancing broad and cost-effective access to peer-reviewed scientific, technical and medical research, where the economic benefits to libraries are greatest. This objective is pursued via a two-pronged strategy:

- Incubation of alternative channels of scholarly communication; and
- Public advocacy of fundamental changes in the system and the culture of scholarly communication.

SPARC's members, affiliates and endorsers (institutions in North America, the U.K., Europe, Asia, New Zealand and Australia) support its mission via a variety of local initiatives. Full members of **SPARC** pledge, in principle, a purchase commitment to **SPARC**-partnered journals that fit their collection development agenda.

Measuring Success

There's no overnight solution to the serials crisis, and we don't claim that **SPARC** is the solution, either. There are many solutions out there. What excites those of us committed to **SPARC**'s goals is that many new players have entered the STM marketplace in the past two years: not just **SPARC** journals, but other creative, much-needed initiatives like the **Public Library of Science**, **Open Archives**, and many others. While

SPARC doesn't take the credit for these initiatives, I believe strongly that scholars have responded positively in part because of the way **SPARC** member libraries have educated the research community.

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