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Sense and Sensibility

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Sense and Sensibility

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Some publishers produce superior products at low prices. Some produce mediocre products at low prices. Some produce mediocre products at high prices. And some produce superior products at high prices. And so forth.

It's always been this way as far as I know.

So why is it that librarians of late seem to leap from a price or pricing scheme that offends to the assumption that the publisher, regardless of track record, is consumed by greed and out to imperil the public good?

The vast majority of publishers are people motivated by much the same ends as those motivating librarians. They didn't go into publishing to make money. There are many businesses more profitable than the average publisher.

Many publishers have for many years produced high-quality moderately priced titles. They've been supportive of libraries—acknowledging the importance of library lending, and charging reasonable copyright fees for Document Delivery. Software and audio-visual companies, by contrast, have allowed little leeway to libraries. Video-rental operations complain bitterly about any library aspiring to a really useful circulating collection. Publishers and bookstores have not.

It is unfair to let publishers who have always provided good value take the rap for those who haven't. And for librarians to view with suspicion not only the pricing structures and license limitations of such publishers, but also the motives behind them, is also unfair.

"There are many businesses more profitable than the average publisher."

Problems with acquisitions budgets reflect forces largely beyond library or publisher control. Funding for higher education itself is a problem which seems likely to get worse before it gets better as universities face growing competitive forces and struggle with rising technology costs. As the structure of scholarly communication changes, it is critical that we get it right this time around. We need to identify our allies and invest in them.

The number of desirable titles in all formats goes up and up—faster than budgets go up or ever will go up. Nor do budgets reflect the reality that monographic sets are going online and that these titles, which were one-time expenditures, are now ongoing expenditures. Combined, these forces may well result in libraries offering fewer titles than previously, and in the sort of "vanilla" collections that have worried us in print.

Having made sure publishers understand the realities of library funding, we need to understand their dilemma. I have never felt happier to be buying rather than selling. When libraries get it wrong, we have all sorts of options. One could, in theory, weed those mistakes. Or there's storage. Or, better yet, just let the item sit there and await the needs of future generations. It's hard to prove that wrong. And difficult though it may be, it is always possible to cancel. When libraries get it wrong, we have second chances. And a librarian's risk of getting fired or experiencing long-tem career problems over a bad decision is not high.

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It is not my impression that this is true for everyone in the publishing industry. Many publishers are operating on very narrow margins. Small changes in costs and sales figures can have substantial impact. Even when such missteps do not jeopardize the publisher itself, it seems likely that they can be career threatening for those who got it wrong.

It's a mistake to focus too much on what things used to cost in paper. Libraries are not in a good position to argue that online doesn't cost a lot more. We asked for integrated library systems, partly on the grounds that they would be cheaper and more efficient. We wouldn't have to have an army of filers. Think of the savings in paper for cards and oak for catalog cabinets. And, we pointed out; we would offer value-added features. Patrons would be able to tell what was checked out, at the bindery, on order, at other libraries, and so forth and so on.

We were right about the value-added and we were wrong about the costs, mainly, I think, because we couldn't anticipate the infrastructure required by these new entities. No one mentioned network specialists, server managers, or 24x7 help desks. But we have them now and we want more. They cost lots more than filers did. Fiber optic cable isn't noticeably cheaper than catalog cards. Or servers than catalog cabinets. The online world has all sorts of advantages—but lower costs are not always among them.

I would suggest a principle for identifying publishers who have unsatisfactory pricing structures at the moment, but who might be regarded more as future allies than as emerging bad guys.

This is the assumption that the future sometimes resembles the past.

That isn't always true, of course. On the whole, though, if you want sunny weather, you move to Arizona in preference to Montana. In the southwest, we speculate as to why winters are lately so mild and conjecture about global warming. But I'd still bet on Arizona if I were searching for year round sunshine. When making choices in everyday life, we assume that a person, company, or service which has served us well for years will continue to do so. This assumption is sometimes wrong, but surely it's a reasonable place to start.

There are only a few problem publishers. They control a big piece of the current landscape, but there aren't that many of them. And in a world in which the underlying mechanisms of scholarship—and its validation and dissemination—are changing and faculty seem lately more militant than librarians, competitive forces at last may exert significant downward pressure on tolerance towards outrageous prices.

Publishers who provided excellent value in print deserve the benefit of the doubt as they dream up electronic pricing schemes that will protect them, they hope, from too rapid a decline in print sales and assorted other disasters. Before widespread cancellations, libraries paid prices which rose at an incredible rate, whether calculated in dollars or percentages. Publishers of titles which don't cost a lot today could have asked for and gotten similar prices. If they didn't raise prices then, mightn't we assume they intend to continue reasonable pricing? And if there are glitches and problems and prices that seem too high, there may be explanations.

It might be fear. It might be anxiety. And it might be justified.

Libraries, individuals, laboratories, and businesses may well stop buying paper—or buying as many titles electronically as they would like—not because they want to, but because they don't have funding to do essential new things and keep up the old ones as well. Maybe not this year, but it's very difficult to know how things will be three or four years down the road.

But the bottom line needs to be cost. There is ample evidence that it is possible to produce a scholarly journal, in paper or electronically, for a few hundred dollars and/or at a price per use libraries can handle. Indexes may be a different matter—they are labor intensive and it's harder to find volunteers to index than it is to find faculty to write and referee without remuneration.

We shouldn't let concern about prices blind us to the need to invest in the future. Sending funds—maybe substantially more funds than the product is initially worth—to publishers with good track records is making an investment in the long-term availability of high quality low-priced titles.

If journals costing a hundred dollars or books costing fifty dollars should double or triple in price, they might still be bargains. Those costing several hundred or thousand dollars might not be bargains even if they were to lower their prices. It may be more difficult now to identify the problem players; and there is disagreement as to which they are. (Or, at least, many don't seem to agree with me as to their identities.) But it is possible, and not even very difficult, to identify publishers with long-term outstanding track records.

Once you've established that a title is high quality, there are common-sense ways of getting an idea of what the price should be. You can ascertain the average price of a title in the field. You can ascertain the average price of a title from this publisher. You can compare the two. Or, as with paper, you can look at per use costs. This isn't exact or scientific, but it tells you what ballpark you're playing in. When you find a publisher consistently producing good titles at reasonable prices, why not bet on that one? Don't worry too much about whether the current pricing structure is great. Just send money. And talk to your faculty about publishing there.

And They Were There — Reports of Meetings

YBP's GOBI Users' Group Meeting

YBP's GOBI Users' Group Meeting
January 14, 2001, ALA Midwinter, Washington D.C.

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Bob Nardini began the meeting by reading a quote from **Calvin Coolidge**, upon visiting a Wisconsin state fair, about being more than an exhibit. He expressed his appreciation for the opportunity to do likewise. This was the **6th Annual GOBI Users' Meeting** and it does, indeed, indicate a trend within the library materials vending field whereby they need to meet with their customers in groups to talk about new products.

Gary Shirk, President and Chief Operating Officer, then talked about **YBP**'s commitment to e-books. Currently, **YBP** is alpha testing the display of e-book options with **North Carolina State University**. They are in negotiation with **NetLibrary** and expect an announcement very soon. He noted that **YBP** would provide whatever content publishers make available to them. He expects that within 4-6 months customers will be able to purchase e-books directly from **YBP**. They are currently working on the infrastructure to allow this. They expect to integrate e-books into their approval universe. This means that they will be profiled and offered as a choice much like paperback versus cloth. They plan to work on links from e-books to the print versions they have already treated and provide a retrospective list for their customers.

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