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MILLENNIUM

Minutes

Richard Abel and Don Chvatal Testify Before Congress

Column Editor: **Lucretia McClure** (Librarian Emerita, University of Rochester Medical Center)

by **Dora Biblarz** (Associate Dean, University Libraries-Continuous Improvement, Arizona State University) <biblarz@asu.edu>

April 23, 1971, **Richard Abel** and **Don Chvatal** Testify Before Congress.¹

In the Spring of 1971, **Richard Abel** and **Don Chvatal** – then an executive at **Richard Abel & Company** – testified before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Library of Congress, as this Subcommittee was inquiring into the effectiveness of **Title II**, especially part C of the Higher Education Act of 1965. This Act “authorized the Office of Education to transfer funds to the **Library of Congress** for the ambitious purposes of acquiring, insofar as possible, all current library materials of value to scholarship published throughout the world, and of providing cataloging information for these materials promptly after they had been received.”²

This effort was named the **National Program for Acquisitions and Cataloging (NPAC)**.

Title II had a great impact on college and university library collections; at the same time, other pressures, such as skyrocketing enrollments from the early baby boomers and the **GI Bill** helped to accelerate the rapid growth of public institutions and their transition from four-year college status to universities with several Master's and PhD programs.

Abel was a personal friend of the Chairman, **Edith Green**, Representative from Oregon, and she gave a warm introduction: “I am especially glad to welcome both of you to the committee session. For the benefit of my colleagues, **Mr. Abel** has been in the business of gathering books and cataloging them for a long period of time. I know of no one who is a greater expert than he.”

Abel started by describing his company's services to library customers and the fact that they handled publications from all over the world. “Our object is to get scholarly materials into the hands of educators, researchers, and students in the most efficient and most economical manner.” This mission is evident throughout his testimony as the over-riding goal of the **Abel Company**.

He also noted that the implementation of **Title II** came at a time “when the so-called information explosion was taxing the capabilities of [academic] libraries to meet the demands that were being placed upon them.”

In the section that followed, **Abel** gave a brief description of how his company devel-

oped their services and products.

“In our early years in the book business we concentrated on overcoming those traditional practices in the book trade that create an unnecessary time lag between the ordering of a book and its delivery to the library customer.... It soon became apparent that delivery time to the library is only one of the impediments to a satisfactory dissemination system.

There are other functions, normally beyond the control of the [book] dealer, involving enormous duplication of effort among libraries, causing delay in making materials available to patrons, and contributing to increased clerical costs within each library.

The result is that a smaller proportion of budgeted funds is being utilized for the direct acquisition of books and other publications.”³

The first of these impediments was the search and ordering process, which he recommended could be simplified and speeded up by use of approval plans.

The second was the “time consuming and tedious clerical work involved in creating a catalog record or in duplicating a record from another source, usually the **Library of Congress**.”

Abel then described the system devised at his company for producing cards by computer and furnishing them automatically when requested to do so by a library customer. His company was then providing catalog cards to over 300 libraries; also preparing processing kits of spine labels, book pockets, and a circulation system “which leaves all of the library's technical processing to us.” They could afford greater economies of scale since “the initial keypunching for the creation of a basic catalog card set is the same whether you are producing cards for 5 libraries or 500.” The company also took full advantage of the automated systems that existed and **Abel** inserted a plea for standardization in the development of electronic data processing systems.

Note: **OCLC** was founded as the **Ohio College Library Center** in 1967, “to develop a computerized system in which the libraries of Ohio academic institutions could share resources and reduce costs.”⁴ In 1977, the original members of this regional computer system adopted changes in the governance structure that enabled libraries outside Ohio to become members. The **Abel Company**

outsourcing services were initiated before the national adoption of **OCLC**.

The **Abel Company** also benefited from the shared cataloging and foreign acquisitions program, as authorized by **Title IIC**: first, as a check against their own worldwide book acquisitions program; second, as input into the Company's computer-produced catalog card service, thus **Richard Abel** was a strong sup-

porter of this legislation.

The **Company** followed **LC** cataloging practices – hiring professional catalogers for this purpose – and used **LC** records whenever possible for the cards supplied to customers. Usually, libraries' instructions were to supply the catalog cards, when they became available, by way of **Title II** cards, proof slips, or **MARC** tape.

However, when a significant time elapsed after a book had been shipped and a record for that title had not been produced by **LC**, **Abel Company** staff were to advise customers and they either had to create their own record or have the **RACo** do it for them. **Richard Abel** concluded his remarks stating that “any development that will enable **LC** to acquire the materials and process the catalog records in the fastest possible way will enhance the utility of part C programs for all users.”

It was during the following Q & A that the problem was finally described. Chairman **Green** asked, “what is the time lapse?”

Richard Abel responded that he could only speak in averages: “40% of the cataloging is available after one month for domestic publications in English; 75-80% of the cataloging is available after six months. And at no time have we ever found that 100% of the cataloging is available.”

Mrs. Green then asked about the foreign material that is of interest to the academic community. **Abel** responded by citing statistics from **LC**, illustrated by a table placed in evidence, titled “**Library of Congress – National Program for Acquisitions and Cataloging (NPAC) Availability of Cards. Summary of NPAC Cooperating Libraries – Cumulative Report, June 1966-October 1970.**” This table indicates that 21.2% of the cataloging requested by libraries through this program is not available.

Abel further illustrated this point with statistics internal to his **Company**: In 1969 the **Company** put approx 50,000 books in English and other languages on the approval program.

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At the end of March, 1971, they still had not received cataloging from some 9,000 books. Out of these 9,000 approx 6,000 were in foreign languages.

Efforts to help LC "correct these deficits" were made, such as: "Several years ago, we would wait for 9 weeks after we had sent a book out to libraries. If we had not received cataloging from LC in that period of time, we would send a copy of the book which they would use to catalog from. They asked us to discontinue that program."

"In 1970, we again put about 50,000 books on the approval program.... As of the end of March [1971], something over 13,000 of those books were not yet cataloged.... On the basis of these figures, therefore, we can only conclude that LC is (one) not collecting in that kind of a comprehensive fashion which Congress expected it to do under this act, and (two) that there are some very significant time lags in cataloging those books which they do get."

When asked why he thought LC was not effectively cataloging materials, **Abel** responded that he thought they were using "inefficient acquisition methods. They work from national bibliographies which are notoriously late as well as not inclusive of all the publications printed in their national language." He also believed they had enormous problems in cataloging, such as getting the needed subject and language specialists.

The table mentioned above was placed in the record, illustrating that 21.2% of the cataloging requested by libraries was not yet ordered by LC (all languages). 40% of the requests for cataloging represented titles were received at LC and in process, but not yet cataloged. For 17.6% of the requests the book was on order but not yet received. This was the case for all languages. As for English language only, 22.5% of the titles were to be ordered as a result of cooperating libraries' reports. The highest number in this category was 62.9% for Czech and the lowest 16.3% for Japanese.

For all languages, 20.9% of the titles had printed cards available for immediate use; 40.3% represented titles received by LC and in the process of being cataloged; 17.6% of the titles were on order, with availability reasonably certain.

Abel's criticism was based on his frustration on behalf of his academic library customers. At a time when they needed materials promptly (and so desperately) to support emerging graduate programs and exploding enrollments without any additional funding for staff, they weren't able to make available the materials they received relatively quickly on their approval plans. This canceled out the time advantages of acquiring materials via approval plans, frustrated library users, and kept libraries from being able to economize by reducing the number of catalogers or other technical services personnel (that was one of the objectives of this legislation).

Another issue that **Abel** was concerned about was the need to standardize "information practices" and the development of electronic data

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processing systems. During his testimony, **Richard Abel** described his company's products and services and attributed much of his ability to keep up to the use of computer applications, which helped his company carry out book selection and cataloging. This work cost in excess of \$1 million (in 1971) and **Abel** expressed his policy of constant updating and improvement of systems to make them more responsive to their customers' needs. He stated that "electronic data processing is a fantastic tool for coping with the large volume of useful and often vital material being published throughout the world."

Richard Abel & Company was visionary in developing solutions we now take for granted as common practice.

Endnotes

1. U.S. House Appropriations Committee. "Higher Education Amendments of 1971, Part 2 and Appendix." 92d Congress. 1st session 1971, p.831-844. Quotes in text are from this source unless otherwise noted.

2. Cole, John Y., *Jefferson's Legacy: the Functions of the Library of Congress, Past and Present*. <http://lcweb.loc.gov/loc/legacy/colls.html>.

3. *op cit*. "Higher Education Amendments of 1971."

4. *What is OCLC? History of OCLC*. <http://www.oclc.org/oclc/menu/history.htm>.

5. *op cit*. "Higher Education Amendments of 1971."