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Op-Ed-Opinions and Editorials-What Were They Thinking: Too Much of A Good Thing?

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What Were They Thinking: Too Much of A Good Thing?

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

It all started with one of those color brochures that come in the mail. You know the kind – oversized paper, bright colors, hyperbolic language, with a “big announcement” from a new company (or a company that recently changed its name so that we think it is a new company). These are the kind of things that all too many publishers send out and very few librarians ever look at. But somehow this one was different. It promised a new, comprehensive, electronic version of a standard reference source. I have to admit that I was interested.

In fact, my interest was piqued enough that I decided to attend the demo/sales pitch at the **ALA Annual Conference**. With the exception of the chance to win **Ben Stein’s** unmitigated respect at the **Gale** booth and **ALA’s** game show that offered a chance to win a new car, this was probably the best show in the exhibit hall. The presentation was slick, complete with actors and actresses in Victorian costumes celebrating their new product. The product looked good too, with full-page images appearing instantly on the computer screen in response to the canned searches. There were even prizes, which some lucky librarians presumably took home with them. Take a standard library resource, add comprehensive coverage, sophisticated searching, good acting, and prizes, and you would think that we would all be clamoring for this new product. Unfortunately, I came away from the experience feeling a little uneasy about the whole thing.

In case you have not guessed – or are somehow immune from The-Company-Formerly-Known-As-UMI’s advertising program – the product that I am referring to is **Proquest Historical Newspapers**.¹ More specifically, it is the *New York Times*, which is the first paper to be released in this series. On the surface, this seems to be a librarian’s dream. After all, it is the *New York Times*, the closest thing that we have in the United States to a national paper of record. With access to the Web and a paid subscription, we can search the entire run of the *New York Times*, from 1851 to the present. Articles, editorials, letters to the editor, book and film reviews, obituaries, advertising, and box

scores are all included. If it was in the paper, it’s in this new product. Results can be viewed in either plain text or as a page image. Researchers can find original reports of historic events, study the coverage of people or places over time, or see how products were promoted to the public. Since it is in electronic format, the search and retrieval process is very fast and convenient. With the release of this new product, “All the news that’s fit to print” is becoming “All the news that’s fit to transmit.” What is wrong with this picture?

First, neither the advertising nor the conference demo mentions any price. When asked about it at the end of the presentation, the response was that the product was still in the development stage and that pricing information would be forthcoming. My own guess is that **Bell and Howell** (UMI’s “new” name – and one that I still associate with 16mm films from high school health class – probably not the corporate image that they had in mind) is probably not providing this product as a service to the library community and that they expect to make a reasonable profit from the project. Free Web access to the complete run of the *New York Times* is not something that I expect to see soon. The cost of scanning, indexing, and verifying 3,500,000 pages of newsprint is not inconsequential. Add the additional cost of providing sufficient server and telecommunication capacity to provide full-page images without long download waits and **Bell and Howell** has made a significant investment in this product. Add to that the fact that several other national papers, including the *Wall Street Journal* and *Washington Post*, are receiving similar historical treatment and you realize that the **Proquest Historical Newspapers** is a major project. While the price of the product is still not known, the investment required to produce such a resource makes me worry about whether I will be able to afford it.

Even more important than the absolute cost of the product will be its pricing structure. Is the product sold on a subscription? This is the most likely choice, since the vendor will be adding new issues of the paper on a continuous basis. How will the subscription price be established? A fixed price for

all libraries is simple, but it will discourage smaller institutions from purchasing the product. On the other hand, a price based on population served discriminates against the largest libraries. Simultaneous use is a good model in that it lets libraries select the usage level that most fits their needs,² but this model requires the vendor to have sophisticated monitoring capability to track who is using the product at any given time.

The best model for libraries as the consumer of the product is a one-time purchase. No matter how high the cost, it is almost always easier to allocate funds for a single purchase than an ongoing subscription. A single purchase allows the library to budget for a known price, whereas a subscription price carries with it unknown future cost increases. Even if paid over a period of several years, a purchase transaction does not involve the implicit ongoing financial burden of a subscription transaction. Perhaps **Bell and Howell** could sell segments of the database so that a library over time can buy access to whichever parts of the file are most relevant for its needs. Such a pricing model would be very similar to what all of our libraries did when we bought our microfilm copies of the *New York Times*.

And therein lies my biggest concern. Most libraries have already purchased full-text page images of the *New York Times* – and have done so more than once! Virtually every library in the nation has a subscription to the current, print edition of the *New York Times*. Prices may vary from region to region, but my library currently pays \$698 per year for this privilege. Although comparatively highly priced for a newspaper, this subscription is well worth the daily delivery of this important research tool. The *New York Times* is one of the last subscriptions that I would consider for cancellation.

In addition, most of those same libraries own a microfilm backset of the *New York Times*. A subscription to the current microfilm edition runs about \$3,700 per year – over five times the

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cost of the paper itself. Back volumes are also available, with prices ranging from \$145 for the 1851 calendar year to over \$5,000 per year for the 1980s and 1990s.³ The purchase of the entire backfile of the *New York Times* on microfilm would cost a library \$372,590.00! That price is an enormous sum for any institution and very few would be able to make such a one-time purchase. Although most of us have built our *New York Times* backfile over a long period of time, this price figure is a clear indication of the investment that we have made in this resource.

In addition to the print and microfilm editions, the *New York Times* is also available in fulltext through several electronic vendors. **Lexis/Nexis** offers the *New York Times* from June 1, 1980 to the present and also offers abstracts of articles from January 1, 1969 – May 31, 1980.⁴ **Dow Jones News Retrieval** offers the same coverage as **Lexis/Nexis** since June 1, 1980, but does not include the abstracts of the earlier issues. The *New York Times* is also available since 1986 in several of the various **Proquest** databases. This is not surprising, since **Proquest** is the same company that markets the microfilm and is producing the new **Historical Newspaper** series. While these full text services are text-only and do not contain images, advertising, and other more ephemeral sections of the paper, they do provide all of the news articles, which is what most researchers actually want to read. They also make it easy to search, print, download, or email the articles. For those few researchers who do want to see the original format of the page, the microfilm is always available as a backup. As a subscriber to the print, the microfilm, **Lexis/Nexis**, and **Dow Jones News Retrieval**, my library has already purchased the *New York Times* four times. How many more versions does my library need? Is it possible for a library to have too much of a good resource like the *New York Times*?

There are many arguments in favor of this new product. Yes, the **Historical Newspaper** version allows for superior searching. Yes, it also is more readable than microfilm. And yes, it is better formatted than the simple text of the two database services. But no, I don't need to buy another copy. The *New York Times* is a valuable reference source, but it is not so valuable that the library needs yet another edition. For every dollar spent to duplicate one source of information, that dollar is not spent on purchasing a different, and probably unique, information tool. If librarians had unlimited budgets, there would be no question that we would want the **Proquest Historical Newspapers**. However, in the reality of prices that increase at a rate greater than funding, it is difficult to justify the purchase of the same information several times.

While this column is aimed squarely at

Bell and Howell and the **Proquest Historical Newspapers**, that product and that vendor are not the only ones who are trying to sell us the same information in several formats. Look around your collections and see how many ways you have purchased the same information sources. Often, it seems as though exactly the same full text journals are contained in every product that we buy. In addition to print and microfilm, the last decade's issues of *Newsweek* are available in full text through five different databases in my library's collection alone. Some research journals, such as the *American Journal of Political Science*, are available through at least three online vendors, plus **JSTOR**, plus paper, plus microfilm. Even humanities journals such as *Shakespeare Studies* are available in full text through multiple online databases. This problem is not limited to full text journals. If you ever want to liven up a reference meeting, have a contest and see how many different ways you can discover to gain access to **ERIC** and **Medline**. You will be amazed at how many sources there are for those two old favorites!

Nor is the problem of duplication limited to current issues. *Harper's Magazine* offers a similar deal to the **Proquest Historical Newspapers**. Through the **HarpWeek** project, a library can purchase access to page images of the entire run of the magazine from 1857-1877, with more years currently in production. The Web product offers easy searching, high quality image reproduction, and fast download times. However, the \$40,000+ cost for the product makes the decision to rely upon the bound volumes already in my collection a very easy one. I recently answered a market survey for another major database vendor who wants to sell an electronic version of the backfile of *PAIS*. Once again, my library already owns the entire set in print. An electronic version would certainly be easier and faster to use and would couple nicely with the more recent volumes, which my library owns in electronic (and print) format. However, my response to the survey is that I most likely would not purchase such a database. Why? Because I would rather spend limited funds for something that the library does not already own than to duplicate something already in the collection that gets relatively low use.

Why are vendors developing historic collections that duplicate our existing print and microfilm collections? Probably because we told them to. For years, we librarians have asked vendors to put more retrospective coverage in their databases. Now that vendors are producing such products, we need to work out financial arrangements that make it possible for us to purchase them. On the one hand, vendors should not expect us to pay the same amount – or more – for information that we already own. On the other hand, vendors do need to recoup their investment. There will be no easy answer to this, but some

publishers have already come up with possible solutions. A few models that are already in place are:

Buy one format, get the other free. Several journal publishers are including both the print and electronic formats for the basic subscription price. This offer usually comes directly from the journal publisher, although intermediary vendors such as **Faxon** and **Ebsco** can also provide a library with the list of journals for which it is eligible for free electronic access. Budgeting for this model is easy, since no additional funding is required. However, canceling the print results in canceling the electronic access as well.

Pay a little more, get a lot more. Some journal publishers offer their entire collection of journals for slightly more than a library pays for its current print collection. **Elsevier**, **Wiley**, and **Academic Press** all currently use this model. For only a little more than a library currently pays, usually in the 10%-25% range, the library gains access to all of the titles published by that vendor. While this costs the library more than the sum total of their existing print subscriptions, the return on this investment is that the library gets a large number of journals available electronically that it did not previously own. Of course, a library may not really need all of the titles included in the package (or else wouldn't it already be subscribing to that title?). However, based simply on the number of titles provided, this model gives a library a big return for a small investment. Ironically, part of the deal is always that the library cannot cancel its existing print subscriptions, thus ensuring a continued duplication of some of the titles in at least two formats.

Credit for past investment. This is not a model that is being used much (if at all), but one that could be very appropriate when a new version of an existing product is released. Those libraries that have made a significant investment in the old format could be given a certain amount of credit towards the purchase of the new format. A library could get a discount of a certain percentage for having bought the information in a previous format. This model recognizes that libraries already have the information in one format and rewards them for upgrading to the new format.

Exchange of formats. Another possibility would be to allow libraries to exchange one format for another. For example, a library could return the print or microfilm volumes and receive credit towards the purchase of the electronic version. In the old CD-ROM days, returning disks was a common feature of the license agreement. Some business books, such as the *Million Dollar Directory*, even have a return policy for the print format. Perhaps this idea could be extended to offer credit between formats.

I suspect that **Proquest Historical Newspapers** and **HarpWeek** are just the begin-

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ning of a new trend. Venders will undoubtedly release other key reference sources from the past in similar electronic formats. If these are going to be successful for both the vendor and the librarian, the products will need to take into account the historic investment that libraries have already made in those resources. So how about it, **Bell and Howell**? My library – and thousands of others – have already made an investment of over 1/3 million dollars in the *New York Times*. You have the opportunity to set an example for the industry. What kind of deal are you willing to make us?

Endnotes

1. For a complete product description, see <http://proquest.com:8090/promo/histNews/>.
 2. For a discussion of problems with various pricing models, see: "The Oxford English Dictionary on the Web. *Against the Grain*, v. 12 no. 4, September 2000, pp. 38-42.
 3. All prices are taken from the Bell and Howell "Newspapers in Microfilm" Web page at <http://www.wlib.umi.com/nim/entry>.
 4. See the Lexis/Nexis "Source List" for a full description of their coverage of the *New York Times*.
- Prices come from the HarpWeek Web page at <http://www.harpweek.com/4AboutHarpWeek/HowToPurchase/HowToPurchase.htm>.

You Gotta Go to School for That — The XY Files

As written by **Jared Alexander Seay**, The Librarian formerly known as "Jerry"

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Having now had the opportunity to experience the joy of raising a human male child for the last 20 months, I feel I can truly appreciate the "war stories" and anecdotal evidences that until now I have passed off as basically "yea, right." Specifically, I refer, of course, to the vast gulf of difference that lies between those born with a full compliment of two X chromosomes – and thus blessed to be female – and those born male and thus saddled with the burden of going through life with only one X chromosome (sigh). Oh, the injustice of it all.

For starters, though I had heard of the great behavior differences in little girls and little boys, the fact that I had neither in my life gave me little reason to consider such trivial matters. Golly, what a difference a birth can make!

Now I am completely immersed, informed, and amazed. Take your standard playing with toys session. Little girls will carefully pull dolls, stuffed animals, and assorted plastic things from the toy box and precisely line them up on the table or the floor. I have seen this in action. They are just so neat and meticulous.

When confronted with the same opportunity, my little **Tristan** is keenly aware that he has the ability to grab handfuls of assorted stuffed animals, cars, and plastic stuff and launch them individually and in groups into the air in rapid fire succession. Toy boxes to him are places from which to obtain flingable items – ammunition boxes if you will.

The little boy trend toward "action" is in
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