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Alternative Presses-Making Decisions on Alternative Books

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Against the Grain

"Linking Publishers, Vendors and Librarians"

Alternative Presses

by **Bob Nardini** (Yankee Book Peddler)
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NB: This was first given as a paper at the Southeastern Library Association Annual Meeting.—KS

Most of us would probably be a little hazy if asked to say what an "alternative publisher" is. If pressed, I'd boil it down to two things: an alternative publisher's books must 1) contradict the opinions or grate on the sensibilities of most people; and, 2) be hard to buy.

Of course, number two ensures that number one rarely comes to pass. Publishing is the easy thing about publishing. Marketing and distribution are the hard things.

I'd refer you to an essay entitled, "The Culture of Everyday Venality, or A Life in the Book

Industry." It outlines four common views on alternative publishers:

- they're ineptly run by visionary but incompetent people living in former doll factories in Brooklyn or quaint Ruskinian cottages in Oregon;
- they have no money for quality production, promotion, or royalties;
- they owe printers a lot of money;
- you can't find their books anywhere.

They're idealistic and poor; but there's another reason why they fail: "these presses are not able

to function adequately because they are day in and day out screwed by the routine and hardly-worth-mentioning venality and psychopathology of everyday American business practices"—which practices, all centered on book distribution, the author, **Margaret Wehr**, describes in hilarious, depressing detail. I recommend the essay. It's in the Spring 1997 issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*.

Fortunately for me, her essay is about retail, not distribution to libraries, where a book vendor actually might help to put books from alternative publishers onto shelves.

For larger academic libraries today, the approval plan is the predominant way to acquire new books, and approval plan sales account for most of the business of the company I work for, YBP. Approval plans have been criticized for channeling libraries toward mainstream books. So, as a kind of report card, I compared our approval plan list to the list of alternative publishers contained in the directory of alternative pub-

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If Rumors Were Horses

Let's see! What a surprise! Who would have guessed? **RoweCom** (NASDAQ: ROWE) has purchased **Dawson Information Services Group** including **Information Quest**, **Faxon**, **Dawson Espana**, **Dawson France**, **Dawson UK**, **Faxon Canada, Ltd.**, **Faxon Company, Inc.**, and **Turner Subscriptions** for a minimum of 30 million pounds (29 million pounds cash, 1 million in shares, with about 4.5 million pounds to come depending on performance over the coming year). **Dawson** will retain the book business as well as **EOSi** library software as well as the right to use the **IQ Internet** software. "The disposal of the Subscription business will enable the Group to focus on its core distribution skills in newspaper, magazine and books activities. The Group will also be seeking new ways to utilize and expand its distribution net-

work," said **Lyndon Haddon**, the Chairman of **Dawson Holdings Plc** (London: DWN.L), in his letter to shareholders. The deal is subject to approval by Dawson's shareholders. The acquisition is expected to add more than \$350 million in annual revenues and significantly enhance RoweCom's gross margins and accelerate profitability. The acquisition is being accounted for under the purchase method of accounting. The units acquired are all companies involved in subscription services, Web-based electronic information delivery, and library information management software and services. The group employs approximately 500 people and serves over 20,000 clients, most of which are in RoweCom's core vertical and academic markets. All of Dawson's clients will ultimately be converted to RoweCom's Web-based **kStore** or **kLibrary** from Dawson's current services. The Dawson acquisition includes operations in nine locations: Folkestone, UK; Paris, France; Madrid, Spain; London, Ontario; Montreal, Quebec; Westwood, Mas-

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Alternative Presses from page 1

lishers published by **Charles Willett's CRISES Press**. How did we do? Approval plans normally offer coverage for a list of publishers, whose titles get screened for things like subject, price, and so on. A given library can opt for any or all of the publishers offered. The CRISES directory lists 138 publishers, of which YBP offers approval coverage for 57, or 41%, a respectable showing, I thought, for a group of publishers by definition out of the mainstream.

This next finding made me even happier. Beyond the 138, CRISES lists 16 publishers that "did not respond" to its questionnaire. (Now there's a sign of an alternative publisher, one who doesn't respond to questionnaires about alternative publishers!) YBP's approval program covers three of the non-respondents. (Sometimes they don't respond to us, either.)

Now approval plans ship books automatically, without the need for libraries to place orders or to locate titles to order in the first place. This frees librarians for other work. We never advocate entirely relying upon approval plans, and ideally that "other work" would include searching for the alternative titles not covered by the approval plan. We'll cheerfully supply these titles too, by filling the firm orders sent to us. In fact, during our last fiscal year, we recorded at least a few sales for nearly all publishers on the CRISES list. Our figures for some individual publishers are difficult to dig out of our system, since the ones selling to us through distributors are buried within overall sales to the distributor. (These missing figures would include such prominent publishers as **Alyson**, **City Lights**, **Coffee House**, **Common Courage**, **Four Walls Eight Windows**, and **Zed Books**.) But, for those publishers selling to us directly, YBP's ten best-selling CRISES publishers last year were **Island Press** (3402 volumes sold), **Prometheus Books** (2190), **Africa World** (1748), **Orbis Books** (1626), **Crossroad** (1185), **Arte Publico** (998), **Amnesty International** (896), **Human Rights Watch** (751), **Monthly Review** (548), and **Dalkey Archive** (427). (To give perspective to these figures—and to give the mainstream its due—our customers bought nearly 84,000 **Oxford University Press** volumes from YBP during the fiscal year.)

It's hard to be an alternative publisher! You have to take on **Oxford University Press**. One day you'll probably go out of business. If you don't, if you prosper or even just stick around, are you still "alternative?" Next to failure, there's another trap fatal to alternative publishers, success.

Despite what happens to most, as recorded by Wehr, it's more possible today than ever before, thanks in part to desktop publishing technologies, to the availability of marketing

and financial advice, to new distribution and publicity methods, and to the fragmentation of interests and tastes among readers, for some small, alternative publishers to make a real go of it.

A few years ago, *Publisher's Weekly* came out with its fourth annual list of the fastest-growing "Small Publisher Standouts" (11/17/97). *PW* listed 21 publishers and referred to its "most eclectic list to date." A couple could vaguely be considered "alternative," but most were examples of "niche publishing." Their lists are targeted toward very specific interest areas and groups of readers. The number one growth publisher was Wisconsin's **Willow Creek Press**, which grew 875%, with \$3.9 million in 1996 sales on 15 titles about hunting, fishing, pets, bird-watching, and gardening.

Most publishers listed, in fact, were one way or another about self-help or personal fulfillment, focused on recreation, health, or spirituality. Today self-help books of every kind are so common that it's easy to forget that the genre was largely born in the early glory days of alternative publishing, the 1960s and 1970s, when bypassing all "establishment" ways was considered a subversive act. Some of our more successful small presses got their start this way. Lawyers were purely establishment, of course, and *How to Do Your Own Divorce in California* gave us **Nolo Press**. Boycotting the chain supermarket was a good thing, and **Backyard Livestock** launched **Countryman Press**. Somehow Volkswagens came to stand for all this, and *How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive*, kept **John Muir Books** alive for years.

It's hard to dissent the point of all this. If you get no one's attention, you're out of business. If you do get people's attention, before long you're part of a crowd and not dissenting anymore.

What if you develop a successful author, or authors? One thing I did in preparing these remarks was to talk to a special collections librarian who has devoted her career to alternative publishers. Her name is **Anne Tracy**. She has worked at **Michigan State University** for 25 years and by now, she has the cycles figured out. A press, she finds, begets writers, writers beget circles and networks, which beget formal workshops, which beget MFA programs ... which beget university presses. One trend today, she reports, is that the larger publishers "scout" the alternative publishers, like baseball teams scout the minor leagues.

I'm sure we all agree that paying attention to publishers who somehow succeed in their dissent is an important thing for librarians. It's important that diverse points of view

be reflected in collections; a corollary of this, it's important that diversity among library patrons be reflected in collections; it's important for future historians that we document today's America as fully as budgets and space and staffing will allow; and it's important that librarians support the heroic work of those who take on the odds and launch alternative publishing houses.

If you believe those things to be true, then it's important to think hard about what we mean by "alternative." The introduction to the CRISES guide refers to "marginalized feminists, environmentalists, anarchists, socialists, racial minorities, gays, lesbians, poor people" as examples of those with alternative points of view. That's a good list. But one thing common to nearly all library discussions of alternative publishing is a focus on the left. Could our list include, maybe, survivalists, fundamentalists, libertarians, monastics, mercenaries, and Scientologists? The left has no monopoly on alternative points of view, and librarians should ask themselves if they would try as hard to select on the right as on the left, or if all religious points of view in their community, say, are represented in a library collection. What about points of view that don't

fit on a left-right axis? What about those points-of-view to which a librarian isn't personally sympathetic?

Here's an example, one included on the CRISES list by the way, **Loompanics Unlimited**, of Port Townsend, Washington, which publishes, as it says here, "the best book catalog in the world." It's a catalog,

according to the introduction, for the "lunatic fringe of the libertarian movement." Loompanics professes not to believe in laws or regulations, or censorship or secrecy, or respectability. "We don't care about anything," says Loompanics, "except having fun and your right to find out anything you want to know. Nothing is sacred to us, not even skepticism and self-reliance." Loompanics, as you will see if you spend even a minute with their catalog, has figured out how to grate on everyone's sensibilities.

The Loompanics catalog is indeed amazing. Sometimes it's more than a little scary—there are sections on "revenge," "weapons," and "guerrilla warfare." But there are also sections on "head for the hills," "underground economy," "self-publishing," "fake I.D."—a form of self-publishing, I guess—and "reality creation." Two sample titles from the "self sufficiency" section, one of the catalog's more harmless areas, are: *The \$1.98 Cookbook: How to Eat Like a Gourmet and Save \$6,000 a Year*, and *The Art & Science of Dumpster Diving*. In the "Miscellaneous" section, *The Tattoo Buyers Guide* is on the page facing

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"Publishing is the easy thing about publishing. Marketing and distribution are the hard things."

Demystifying the Ebook from page 18

SoftBook Reader by **SoftBook Press**, (<http://www.softbook.com>) is currently the only e-book device that can obtain content without the use of a PC and is fully OEB compliant.¹² It weighs in at 2.9 lbs., and currently has about 100 digital books.

Rocket eBook by **NuvoMedia Inc.**, (<http://www.rocketbook.com>) has excellent ergonomic features but its downloading process is a bit cumbersome. It offers some 700 titles and weighs 22 oz. It also offers **eRocket** software that allows users to read unencrypted **RockEditions** on PCs.¹³⁻¹⁴

Everybook Dedicated Reader by **Everybook Inc.**, (<http://www.everybook.net>) is currently the only e-book in the market offering two color hinged screens (at 450 dpi) that look like hardcopy books. Its primary target is textbook and reference publishers because of its capacity to reproduce complete graphic material, such as simple video and animation. **Everybook's** three models are due to debut in late 1999, 2000, and 2001 respectively.¹⁵

Glassbook Reader software by **Glassbook, Inc.** (<http://www.glassbook.com>) and **Librius** (<http://www.librius.com>) have created secure systems to transfer copyright protected (EBX), encrypted content on a number of e-readers, desktops, and laptops.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ **Peanutpress.com** (<http://www.peanutpress.com>) showcases current popular fiction and nonfiction titles and out-of-print material from authors for handheld devices,¹⁹ and **NetBooks.com** (<http://www.netbooks.com>) offers a selection of out-of-print and hard to find e-books.²⁰

MesaView, Inc., (<http://www.mesaview.com>) features hundreds of e-books for various hardware devices,²¹ and **netLibrary** (<http://www.netlibrary.com>) sells academic, professional, and reference e-books from 40+ university presses and publishers.²²⁻²³

In the End

At the end of the day, the decision to venture into the e-book frenzy will be a highly personal one for the consumer. Among the criteria will be gadget preference, assessment of improvements in online reading technology, cost, ease of use, and practical applicability to work or play.

In the academic field, some libraries will want to take advantage of the student population as formal or informal focus groups. In addition to product cost, service, and user-friendliness, assessing student interest and usage levels will become part of the equation in defining how, when, or if universities and colleges will embrace the e-book realm. Will e-books on campus become the next technological movement and become as popular as the now ho-hum Web?

Publishers will want to keep eyes and ears close to the ground, particularly in terms of standardization initiatives to en-

sure their intellectual property is viewed as the publisher intended regardless of hardware. Will the standardization of e-book file and format structure cause a temporary flurry of direct sales by academic and professional publishers instead of using digital booksellers?

What role will the serial and book vendor play in this new territory? Will they be able to strategically jockey into position between publisher and e-book content seller to service the needs of thousands of library customers?

If e-book content sellers such as alternative presses and device vendors intend to stay in the e-book game, they will want to pay special attention to the demands of the market and heed their preferences. Otherwise, they run the risk of finding themselves in the *print* pages of historical discussions.

NOTE: Independent reviewing sources for PDA's, Laptops, and Palm PC's: 20-20 Consumer, (<http://www.pdapage.com>)

Additional information on e-book related matters: **eBook Connections**, (<http://www.ebookconnections.com>).

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The Resurrection of Aristocracy, of which Loompanics says, "It is not just do-gooders, liberals, and wimps who have utopias."

They're all real books, all in stock and for sale. YBP sold 45 Loompanics titles last year (although not on approval). Here are two of them, personal favorites. This one, *How to Hide Things in Public Places* is from the "Privacy and Hiding Things" section. And this one, *How to Start Your Own Country*, is from the "Anarchism and Egoism" section of the catalog.

The point here is not that all of you should next week go out and stock your libraries from this catalog. The point, instead, is that "alternative" can truly mean "alternative." Making decisions on alternative books can be among the hardest you'll ever make as a librarian. The one certain thing is that no matter what decisions you make, no matter which books you buy, there will be somebody out there looking for an alternative to you.

Endnotes

1. "Handheld reader devices & other information," available at <http://www.hardshell.com/devices.html>.
2. "How to read our books" available at <http://www.hardshell.com/howto.html>.
3. "What's an eBook?," available at <http://www.ebook.net>.
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