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netLibrary.com: Cautious Optimism / Views from a Research Library and a University Press

by **Janet L. Flowers** (Head of Acquisitions, Academic Affairs Library University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) <janet_flowers@unc.edu>

Like a meteor, the concept of the e-book as a collection and not just as a novelty has suddenly hit the scholarly communications world. On March 29, 1999, **netLibrary.com** launched its Website, claiming to be the first and best site from which to acquire electronic books. At the **UNC-CH Academic Affairs Library**, staff were vaguely aware of this development but a meeting with the **University of North Carolina Press** in late May 1999 raised our consciousness considerably.

netLibrary.com modeled its services on the traditional library: users can check-out books (if their institution has subscribed to the service). At this Website, users can also purchase e-books as well. The site includes a free reading section with public domain titles, a bookstore for shopping, and a main library for circulation of materials. Currently, the site appears focused at both the individual user and the library user. A number of well-known publishers, including several university presses, have entered into limited agreements with the company. **netLibrary.com** reports that the Website is receiving extensive usage, with around 1 million hits per week in the first couple of months. For libraries that join the program, **netLibrary.com** provides usage statistics, although not at a personal level to protect privacy. **netLibrary.com** has targeted large consortia as desirable customers. **OhioLink**, **Palinet**, and **CARL** have already joined. **netLibrary.com** appears well prepared to handle the high volume of traffic that large groups of users may generate.

When determining whether to become a participating publisher, **UNC Press** perceived several benefits. They liked the scholarly focus of the company, their attention to the library community, and their promises of protecting intellectual property rights. The company, which appears to be well-backed financially, has considerable internal expertise, especially in financial transactions. Publishers, of course, wonder how libraries will react to the product and whether their already strained book budgets can sustain yet another competitor for their dollars. As the company is quite new, **UNC Press** sees it as a "work in progress." They noted that schedules for launching **netLibrary.com** had slipped and

approaches, including technological ones, had changed in the course of their somewhat short relationship. On the other hand, they noted that this is not unusual for a start-up venture of this magnitude.

The **UNC Press** described their approach to selecting titles to include on the **netLibrary.com** site, providing interesting insights into the issues from the publisher's perspective. They ultimately selected approximately 100 titles, all of which were at least two years old in order not to compete with new book sales. They decided to include titles randomly rather than in specific subject areas to see whether certain disciplines were of more interest to users in electronic format than others. To reduce the amount of effort required to obtain the permissions for the electronic rights, they eliminated works with multiple authors or highly illustrated books. While this approach seems sensible from the publisher's perspective, especially in light of the trial nature of the new enterprise, it results in a highly unpredictable database for librarians and users.

Publishers are attracted to the **netLibrary.com** arrangement because it represents a potential new market and because of the value-added services, such as fulltext search capabilities, being added to their products. The **UNC Press**, along with a significant number of other publishers who signed on early, is interested in the impact of the new resource on sales; only time will tell what it will be.

Both the librarians and the publishers had concerns about the viability of the **netLibrary.com**'s current approach to fair use. Both sides thought that it is currently

too restrictive and will annoy readers. Both wondered about user behavior. The typical user today either downloads or photocopies rather than taking notes, a touted feature of the e-books on **netLibrary.com**. Several expressed concern over a common misconception among net-users that resources on the Internet either are or should be free. No one had any direct experience with **netLibrary.com**'s personal bookshelves or with the shadow files that keep the notes taken during a session, so the group could not judge their value yet.

As the **UNC** librarians pondered the im-

plications of the **netLibrary.com** concept, access issues quickly arose. In viewing **netLibrary.com**, is one talking about a database or e-books or both? How will libraries handle situations where the book is published only in electronic format? How will libraries handle the addition of **Knowledge Station** (the software required by **netLibrary.com** to download the books) on their public machines? How do selectors make use of a database that is currently a grab bag of titles that are not very predictable? There needs to be sufficient depth and breadth and an adequate means of bibliographic control to make the system viable for large research libraries with already well-developed identification systems for new materials.

University presses, of course, have two major concerns when deciding whether to join **netLibrary.com**. One is their mission of disseminating scholarship. The other is to find ways to improve their profitability. After an assessment of the risks, **UNC Press** believed that they had addressed all of their major concerns and had signed a license that provided them adequate protection. They remain somewhat concerned about their association with a product over which they do not have direct control and the possibility that it could take directions that would harm their reputation. Nonetheless, they believe that their participation is a valuable opportunity and mechanism for learning about various issues related to e-books.

Some librarians expressed reservations about the library model used for **netLibrary.com**. They believed that it would have been wiser to use the new electronic models that have emerged, particularly those that allow for simultaneous users for an additional fee. Some also thought that the ability to email passages to oneself and/or to download passages is a facility now taken for granted by users of research libraries at least. One librarian suggested a category that might be a wise use of the e-book approach, that of time-sensitive computer books, such as user manuals that become quickly outdated. For example, **O'Reilly & Associates**, a well-known publisher of computer books, is a publisher partner. Users would also benefit from the full text search capabilities of these e-books.

The librarians were also concerned about the effects of new demands being placed on already tight library materials budgets. Many users report that, even though they like electronic products, they are not willing to sacrifice the printed materials. They want all for-

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Adventures in Librarianship: Desperate Ax

by **Ned Kraft** (Order Librarian, Ralph J. Bunche Library, U.S. Department of State) (kraftno@state.gov)

I received an email query several days ago from the U.S. embassy in Kenya. They're trying to rebuild their small, uncataloged reference collection, destroyed by the bombing of 1998. As you might imagine, their want-list includes some old, obscure, "gray lit" of the governmental and semi-governmental breeds. As you might also imagine, I'd like to help the Nairobi Embassy rebuild in any way possible. I'd like to place all my imagined virtues at their disposal: my years of tracking down the obscure, my understanding of the out-of-print marketplace and government publications, my devotion to aggressive service. Then I took a good look at the list.

Have your eyes ever glazed over from trying to read long strings of acronyms? I had a hard time focusing. I checked to make sure that these were English citations. Yep, the acronym-laden titles were peppered with "and's" and "the's" and the occasional "agency" or "conference."

Then there were the vague titles like Voting Handbook—no author, no imprint, no date—titles that could have been published by any county, state, federal, or international agency from now back to 1776. And the Anti-Fraud Handbook, again without a hint of source or date. I imagined the most obscure vest-pocket, gutter-stapled pamphlets, perhaps products of Roosevelt's WPA, impossible to find or replace.

So, what to do.

First things first: I clarified as many citations as possible on OCLC. Then I hit **Books in Print** for those that might possibly be current. Then there was the grab-bag of online resources—the out-of-print sites, GPO and other Web catalogs—and when you are truly desperate, straight Web searching with titles as phrases. I felt a bit like a structural engineer inspecting an old building for restoration. You shine the flashlight in the darkest cracks, brush some ancient dust away, jab the walls, climb up and down and back up again and say to the customer with a deep sigh, "well, we can do this and we can do that, but the other thing? Can't be done."

Though it's probably true in any career, after a decade or so in the business of acquisitions, you like to imagine there's not much you can't find, or (for the truly long-lost) that you can't officially pronounce dead. When someone hands you a list where, despite your most imaginative searching, half of the titles remain not only unfound but unidentified, that feels a bit like failure. "Well," you say to yourself, "I'm no magician. I can't make these things materialize, especially when I've got so little to go on."

True enough, but isn't that what you really want? To be the magician? When that call comes in asking you to purchase Jane Wildwoman's new History of Ashpile County, you'd like to respond "ya know, when I saw that title in last month's Dingus Review I thought of you and bought a copy. They just finished cataloging it and the circulation delivery ought to be reaching your office right about... now!"

I think we'd all like to take those (romantically named) desiderata lists and make the dreams come true. We'd all like to take the flimsiest citations from our patrons and say, "yes, I know exactly which book you mean." And there's a little taste of failure when we can't.

Looking at the Nairobi Embassy's list, scratched now by my red-inked question marks, I took a deep breath and began to type a reply. "...this one is available... that one is out-of-print... as for the rest, unfortunately..." And I'm tempted to add, by way of apology, that I'd like to make his walls, his shelves, his books and newspapers reappear. I'd like to turn back time and erase his tragic loss. But I'm just an acquisitions librarian. 🐾

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mats, which many libraries cannot afford. Therefore, affordability of the e-books is a serious concern to the librarians.

A further concern related to the current lack of standards and the development of competing services which were developed using proprietary software. The content and the technology are intertwined at this point. E-books from **netLibrary.com** cannot be read using a **SoftBook** reader or a **Rocket eBook**. The development, led by **Microsoft**, for an open book standard should help minimize the problem.

Participants agreed that **netLibrary.com** had to begin with publishers in order to have a product to present to librarians, so someone had to take an initial risk. Now, it is the libraries, turn to take some risk. The introduction of e-books into the general collections of libraries will require as much consultation and involve as many different players as has the e-journals and other elec-

tronic resources. Even our brief foray into the issues highlighted the need for involvement by selectors, acquisitions staff, systems staff, reference librarians, circulation staff, and catalogers at the least. This means that the decision-making process for most libraries will take considerably longer than that for printed books. As with e-journals, the process will be time-consuming. There are many new issues including the technical, licensing, and access ones that must be negotiated to make the new resource work well for libraries.

Fortunately, other libraries and publishers are signing on and asking good questions that will help shape the future of **netLibrary.com** and other such ventures. If **netLibrary.com** listens as librarians request opportunities such as trial subscriptions to test the product, much like those offered by the publishers of the e-journals, more will take the plunge in the coming months.

Where will this all lead? No one can predict at this time. However, as with other

electronic products, the issue of source—direct or through a vendor—is certainly one of many considerations. Perhaps approval vendors can offer to announce new e-books added to the database, based on a library's approval profile. Vendors can also sell the e-books to libraries instead of or in addition to print books. Or, a company such as **YBP**, with its **Copyright Direct** software might be able to help libraries manage permissions for transactions for multiple users. However, most vendors are probably just in the preliminary stages of negotiation and are not ready to reveal any details of their possible future partnerships.

netLibrary.com is an exciting and innovative new enterprise which challenges the way that publishers, libraries, and users have traditionally done business. All in the scholarly community should keep tabs on its development and use our influence as possible to reduce the limitations of the current physical library while enhancing the new opportunities provided by the digital one. 🐾