April 1999

Mergers and Acquisitions-Regarding Medusa

Linda Defendeifer

University of Illinois College of Law, defendei@law.uiuc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Defendeifer, Linda (1999) "Mergers and Acquisitions-Regarding Medusa," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 11: Iss. 2, Article 11.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3829>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Mergers & Acquisitions — Regarding Medusa

by **Linda M. Defendeifer** (Assistant Professor of Library Administration, University of Illinois College of Law, 504 E. Pennsylvania Avenue, MC-594, Champaign, IL 61820) <defendei@LAW.UIUC.EDU> reply to: defendei@law.uiuc.edu: Subject-line: ATG M&A [mm/yy].

New readers of *ATG* may be puzzled by the column name. Its genesis is simple: your column editor found that the cardiac-arrest pace of publisher mergers and acquisitions created a cognitive paralysis similar to the physical immobility said to afflict those unlucky enough to glimpse the mythic Gorgon. By facing this phenomenon regularly, she hopes to rationalize the process and to protect the innocent. Take heart, raise your shield, and read on.

In this issue, editors and directors at four university presses discuss the effects that mergers and acquisitions in commercial publishing have had on their work and environment. As you will see, they are anything but paralyzed.

James Clark serves as Director of the University of California Press, a position he has held for 22 years. His broad background includes textbook sales and editorial work in college social science textbooks. He was formerly Vice President of Publishing at Harper & Row. **Janet Fisher**, joined MIT Press in 1959 as Journals Manager and is now Associate Director. Previously she served in various positions at University of Texas Press, finishing as Journals Manager. **David Sanders** entered publishing at University of Ar-

kansas Press, serving at various times as Marketing Manager, Editor in Chief, and Associate Director. **Kate Wittenberg** is Editor in Chief at Columbia University Press, where she began as History Editor in 1986. Prior to that, she was Associate History Editor at Oxford University Press.

ATG: Coming from all institutions outside the commercial fray, what are your general impressions of the current mergers and acquisitions climate in publishing? Have you seen any trends developing during your tenure in your current position?

JC: Yes, I see two effects [in book publishing]. First, University presses are becoming much more commercial, out of a need to compensate for the decline in sales to libraries and to scholars. Second, with the consolidation of commercial trade publishers, more mid-list (3,000-10,000) books are coming to academic presses.

DS: The most noticeable trends seem to be not with the front end of the publishing process - they may be there, but just not as visible - but rather in the wholesale and retail end: Borders, Amazon.com. B&N, and the like. These outlets have an enormous impact on what we do, and to some extent on how

we do it.

As we witness the library dollars shrinking more and more, we find our financial fate rising and falling with the retail and wholesale markets.

JF: I've noticed several general trends in journals publishing in the last few years. Most noticeable is the consolidation of commercial journal publishers into several very big companies. As a publisher attracts more titles in a specific discipline area, it has more power selling into that scholarly community as well as more power to attract new titles in the field.

As more and more library dollars go to fewer and fewer publishers, it is more difficult to get libraries to pay attention to titles from smaller publishers.

The bigger the publisher, the more likely it is to have deep pockets for investment in R&D (either development of new titles, or migrating to new technology and new business models).

As the electronic environment becomes more important, and publishers are pushed to offer a large group of titles to librarians through a standard interface, small publishers find it harder and harder to control their own destiny.

KW: In discussing the effects of the mergers and acquisitions trend on university presses, it is important to distinguish clearly among the different categories of publishing, as the effects are quite different in each of these areas. In

*continued on
page 31*

INFORMATION ON THE PRESSES

	California	Columbia	MIT	Ohio
established	1893	1893	1926	1964
formats	books	books electronic formats	books journals electronic products	books
representatives subjects/areas	critical social issues, great author collections, special editions of classics, art books, major historical studies and research works	reference and scholarly books in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences	architecture, social theory, economics, cognitive science, computational science/artificial intelligence, technology studies	American frontier studies, Victorian studies, contemporary literature, African studies
#titles: annual backlist		150 3000	200	40-45 575
notable	Habits of the Heart, Republic of Fear, Ishi in Two Worlds	Columbia Encyclopedia, Gazetteer of the World; Julia Kristeva, David Mamet		Legacy: A Step-by-Step Guide to Writing Personal History; Anais Nin, Yvor Winters, Fram Waters; distributor for Ravan Press of South Africa

Mergers & Acquisitions

from page 30

the area of trade-book publishing, as more commercial publishers consolidate, we may, as many have said, create new opportunities for smaller publishers such as university presses. There will be books that would, in the past, have been published by the better commercial houses, but now do not clear the necessary financial hurdles. The authors and agents handling these books are increasingly approaching the smaller publishers, including the university presses, about these titles, and often these books do indeed fit into a university press's publishing program. In fact, in some cases, a university press can do a better job of publishing these books than one of the larger commercial houses because it can give the kind of placement on the list and attention that it needs in order to reach its intended audience. While a serious non-fiction trade book on a more specialized topic might have appeared rather far down on the front list at a large trade house, it might appear as the lead title (or one of a few lead titles) at a university press. This development can be a good thing for both the university presses and the authors of these books.

However, in the area of professional, scholarly reference, and journals publishing, I must agree with Janet that the trends towards consolidation are presenting some serious challenges to university presses. In these categories of publishing, the critical mass that is being achieved by the commercial publishers through merging of lists and resources means that it is much easier for them to take advantage of the editorial, technical, and marketing cost efficiencies of a large organization. It also means that there are a few publishers who now control large segments of these markets, particularly in the sciences, making it even more difficult than it was previously for a smaller publisher to break into these fields in both the book and journal field.

ATG: Do you find that the recent consolidation in commercial publishing has affected any of the following, and if so, in what way: demand for your books; markets/outlets; pricing; choice of authors, designers, editors; awareness of your publications?

JC: About demand: Serious non-fiction, first novels and poetry have steady, modest demand. University presses have moved to exploit this segment of the market.

As for markets, major change in all this comes from chains and online book sales. These outlets have leveled the playing field, as it were, so that academic presses can reach the same markets as commercial publishers. Princeton sells 50,000 copies of a bird book; UC Press sells 22,000 of Michael Wood's *In the Footsteps of Alexander*, a PBS tie-in book. Back lists of university presses are now online

at their own Web sites or on commercial sites. The problem in the past was that only new books were marketed; now, the Web enables sales of the full list.

We price for the market, and in the past, books sold in foreign markets were "marked up." But now, with the Web, the world will develop a price as world markets buy from the lowest priced outlets, which so far are all on the Web.

In design and editing, we seek the best we can afford for the trade segment of the list - no major change here, more of an adjustment of present staff.

Op Ed

from page 28

a tiresome, futile exercise. The only ones who seem to enjoy it are those wanting thousands of books on one electronic reader and who seem to spitefully hope that they will be around to see the demise of the printed word. Who actually cares that there are devices that allow us to read text that are nothing more than pixels on a screen? I am doing that as I write this column. I have long since ceased to be impressed. I also have long since become appreciative of the ability to easily, quickly, and frequently edit and revise what I write (type, keyboard). But I would not have used the current issue of *Against the Grain* as my text if it were solely electronic. And I would have been that much poorer for reading only what I discovered by an electronic search.

If, by fiat of the Emperor of Virtual Reality (what a loathsome term, virtual reality), printed books were no longer published, **Jack Walsdorf** would be besieged by people who

Awareness? Reviews in major media (*New York Times Book Review*, NPR, Terry Gross) give wide recognition to titles, but most recognize the book and not the publisher - as it should be.

DS: It is hard to tell whether or not a project has been shopped around to the trade market before it winds its way to us. We have received a spat of good trade prospects, some that we followed up on with some success, others that we were forced, by other considerations, to return.

On the other hand, we have enjoyed the
continued on page 32

would not care whether he had read all his books or not, they would only care that they be allowed to read them or look at them with him or simply hold them in their hands. And those bookstores that **Bob Schatz** loves to frequent, and the superstores, too, would soon be sold out. And then the masses would rise up against the Emperor of Virtual Reality demanding the real thing and expose his nakedness once and for all.

As I write these words, I am reminded of a book that probably bears rereading: *Brave New World*, by **Aldous Huxley**. He never got to hear about virtual reality and cyber experiences, but he seemed to understand what was coming and he could see the horror of it all. Come to think of it, before rereading *Huxley*, we might want to read some **Shakespeare** first and give thanks to Thalia, Terpsichore, Calliope, Clio, Erato, Polyhymnia, and Melpomene for the inspiration they provided him and so many others who flourished before the so-called information age began its attempt to suffocate knowledge and wisdom—murder by ignorance. 🌿

A book wholesaler

WE'D LIKE TO INTRODUCE OURSELVES. We're **Eastern Book Company**, a book wholesaler since 1957. We can locate and quickly ship the titles you're looking for, from trade and academic presses to specialty publishers for science and high tech titles.

Just ask, and we'll search for those out-of-print titles, too. 1-800-937-0331 or scoyne@ebc.com

1-800-937-0331 • 1-207-774-0331 • FAX: 1-800-214-3895 • www.ebc.com

Profiles Encouraged

Robert C. Richards, Jr.,
M.A., M.S.L.I.S.

Technical Services Librarian,
University of Colorado Law Library
Federal Depository Library 0074-C

Fleming Law Building, Kittredge
Loop South, Campus Box 402
Boulder, Colorado 80309-0402

Telephone: (303) 492-2706,

Fax: (303) 492-2707

E-mail: richard@stripe.Colorado.EDU

URL: <http://alexia.lis.uiuc.edu/~richard>

Born when and where: 1966, in Bridgeport, Connecticut. My parents lived one door apart from each other on the same street. They met while my mother was walking the dog after supper one night.

Current residence: Boulder, Colorado: a very beautiful place, but I must confess that I prefer Denver. Once a city mouse ...

Education: B.A. English, Yale University; M.A. Communications Studies/Film Studies, University of Iowa; M.S. Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Summary of job experience: When I graduated from library school in 1996, I found a job as a library technician at the **University of Colorado Government Publications Library** in Boulder, cataloging U.S. documents, and doing Web work. Since February of 1997, I've been **Technical Services Librarian at the University of Colorado Law Library**, where I'm in charge of acquisitions, government documents, the Web interface to our online catalog, and the technical services department's Website.

Most Recent Accomplishment: After several years of hard work, my colleague **Kathleen Kluegel** and I just had a work we co-edited published by the **Reference Division (RUSA) of ALA: Towards a New Vision of Reference: Kaleidoscopic Collections and Real Librarians, RUSA Occasional Papers, no. 23**. And I was recently appointed Chair of the **American Association of Law Libraries' Publications Committee**.

Last Book Read: John Updike, *Toward the End of Time*. Much very beautiful prose, but thoroughly revolting characters. I'm so relieved he's not one of our patrons!

Single Most Important Piece of Advice: My advisor in library school, **Beth Woodard**, assured us that we would find two skills absolutely essential in library work: time management, and the ability to type accurately while enduring sleep deprivation. How right she was (and still is)!

Mergers & Acquisitions from page 31

benefits - as I mentioned - of the superstores and the Internet outlets for selling our books. The effect, I think, has been to increase the trade aspect of our books including those that might otherwise be labeled as purely scholarly.

ATG: *Given the persistent negative reaction to increased prices of scholarly journals, could you imagine a scenario under which university presses would play a dominant role in their publication?*

JC: No. The momentum is from libraries and from university administrators. Most university presses do not know how, or can't afford, to publish cutting edge science journals. It will come in a new form - probably on the Web - and be vetted by administrators and librarians.

DS: We don't publish any journals at Ohio University Press, but it seems utterly reasonable that the universities and by extension their institutional presses should be actively involved in the publishing programs of their academic programs and attendant scholars, as in fact they are.

JF: I believe it would take decisions at the top administrative level of universities about:

1. supporting editorial offices of, or giving start-up subsidies to, journals that arise on their campuses that contract with a non-profit publisher;
2. finding a way to support scholars who submit to, and publish in, the publications of university presses;
3. devoting seed money to university presses that do not publish journals so they could build a program;
4. allowing existing journals programs at university presses to invest more heavily in acquiring existing journals or in starting new journals. This would mean money. It could also mean allowing the press to add staff and space.

ATG: *Is there a point at which the effects of consolidation might cease or reverse? Do you see a limit — a functional rather than a legally imposed limit — to the merger activity? What are the best- and worst-case scenarios for this process?*

JC: Starting a publishing company is easy. There will always be new ideas and lists. I feel that mergers are about at their limit - only a few independents left - but new imprints will pop up and be distributed by bigger houses. Big changes will be from the Web and its impact.

Who knows what is next? But books will stay. How you get them will change.

JF: The only things I can see that would affect it is change in the mindset of scholars. Most of them do not particularly care if a

journal is published by a commercial or non-profit publisher. What matters most is getting their article in the most prestigious journal in the field. Even when new journals are started, researchers tend to be standoffish in the first few years until the abstracting and indexing services begin coverage, and librarians do too.

This makes it extremely difficult for a publisher to start a new journal, and since nonprofit publishers (unless they are large societies) tend to have less of a deep pocket because of traditionally low pricing (and other reasons), they are even less able to start new publications. More and more of the new emerging areas, then, get ceded to commercial publishers which feeds the cycle.

DS: I would be surprised if there were not a natural saturation point for the availability of every published work. On the other hand, it seems to represent a new way - or the beginning of a new way - of understanding access.

KW: I also think that the area of electronic publishing offers some interesting possibilities for the university presses to create innovative publications and partnerships that are not being pursued aggressively by the large commercial publishers. In particular, university presses might put new efforts into creating collaborative projects with the libraries and faculty on their campuses, and work with their librarians as partners in developing projects that can fill a smaller, yet important, market need. It's not that the commercial publishers don't work with these groups as well, but it is sometimes easier to work quickly and creatively with the partners on one's own campus, as relationships have developed already, making collaboration easier.

I agree with Janet that universities could play an important role by supporting their presses in all of the ways she mentions. However, I also think that university presses must take a very aggressive and creative stance in these fields, and begin to think about how they can fill niches in the professional, scholarly, and reference markets that have, for various reasons, been ignored by the commercial publishers. By working closely with faculty in the fields in which they publish, it may be possible to determine where a field is going at an early stage, and to move into that area quickly.

In general, it is a time for the non-commercial publishing world to rethink what it is that we do best, and how we can take advantage of these strengths in a challenging environment. We can never duplicate the size and financial resources available to the newly-merged commercial entities, but we can sometimes use our smaller size and closer proximity to both our authors (faculty) and market (libraries) to our advantage if we think about our operations in new ways.