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Op-Ed-Opinions and Editorials-Murder by Ignorance

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Op— Ed — Opinions and Editorials — Murder by Ignorance — The Electronic Book versus the Real Thing

by **Thomas W. Leonhardt** (Oregon Institute of Technology) <leonhart@oit.edu>

As I read the **ALA Midwinter** issue of *Against the Grain* (Dec 98/Jan 99), containing articles about electronic publishing, electronic books, costs, archiving, dreams, and nightmares, I wondered how we ever reached this state of affairs. The simple answer I have come up with is that we (academic librarians) have taken our eye off the ball and even when we have not, we have not been backed up by management because they have not been present. "Hey, ump, what game are you calling?" It seemed to the earnest baseball fan that the umpire was at another game in another town and not paying attention to the strike zone in front of his eyes, albeit sightless, depending on your point of view. A good baseball fan, just as a good umpire, calls them as he sees them.

How do we see our current situation in which, on top of staggering, crippling price increases for library materials in print format, we have to contend with electronic journals, indexes, abstracts, and other things electronic and digital? We can't blame technology for this one, as much as I would like to. Technology is a tool that we have become too fond of to the point that we look to it as either the source of our problems or our salvation. It is neither. We must look inward for both.

During the 1920s and 1930s, journal prices started to climb faster and more steeply than the library world was comfortable with. Many of those publishers were German and were producing scientific, medical, and technical journals. Perhaps we were saved by World War II, along with the free world. I don't know, I merely want to point out that there is nothing new under the sun except the packaging that things come in. Despite this pre-WWII problem, even in the early 1970s, the average periodical title cost less than the average hardbound book title. If you don't believe me, look it up in the **Bowker Annuals** of those times. Hey, you are librarians; you can do it. And I don't think you will find that information on the Web. Let me know if you do.

We noticed the trend, analyzed it, and began dialogs with publishers. We also

began asking for budget increases, not to buy more books and journals, but to maintain the status quo. Before long, despite large increases, we began losing ground—fewer subscriptions, fewer books.

I once participated in **ALA/RTSD** program with someone who proudly and gratefully reported that her administration had increased the library materials budget by several hundred thousand dollars. Maybe it was a million—it doesn't matter. It was too much money for the wrong reasons. My response was that the administration had not done them any favors. I believed that then and I believe it now. By forcing the issue early on, by not paying the ransom, by turning the blackmail letters over to the authorities, perhaps we could have turned the tide. But we can't dwell on what might have been.

Those budget increases that barely kept the ship afloat, were ways of avoiding the issues—the tenure system, the wholesale donation of scholarly research and copyright to publishers, the unchecked greed, fed by universities while fought by librarians. Our heads are bowed and bloodied, veterans of more than twenty years of doing battle. But the war is not over yet and it is too soon to admit defeat or declare victory.

Enter the electronic age and the forces of evil seem so daunting. We cannot give up. Reinforcements, fresh bodies are needed to join the fray. The cause is just, the cause is not lost. But we need to focus on what the cause really is and not be distracted by the obscene obedience to the false gods of the World Wide Web, the electronic book, instant access to all information as if knowledge and wisdom will follow just as quickly.

In the same issue of *ATG*, there are articles by **Bob Schatz** (p.61) and **Jack Walsdorf** (p.57), talking about books. No, Bob, you are not an anachronism, and no, Jack, you are not alone in accumulating more books than you will prob-

ably ever read, even in retirement if you should live to be a hundred. The books keep coming, and there are still authors with something to say to us.

Judy Luther contributed a report on electronic books in this December 1998/January 1999 issue of *ATG*. (p.74). She seems convinced that manufacturers of electronic books (actually devices that let you read digitized text—sort of like on your computer screen) are heading for a breakthrough. She predicts that early users will be passengers on trains and planes. My prediction is that devices such as Franklin spellers will find an increasing market but despite the ability to produce an electronic book cheaper than a paperback or hardbound book, there may never be a large market for something that in many (most?) ways, is a step backwards from the codex that has served readers for at least 1,500 years.

Access to information, facts, quotes, and so on, may be faster electronically, but does anyone seriously think that the



book, given all its appeal (**Jack Walsdorf** chose one book for its dustjacket, another on the basis of the blurb on a dustjacket), can be improved on? I won't question the motives of those tinkering with electronic books.

It is the nature of human beings to tinker. We even tinker with other human beings—their body parts, psyches, reproductive capabilities. Prometheus unbound all over again and this time with a vengeance. But tinker with books? What is wrong with the book that we have now?

Is the book too large? Use India paper, smaller type. Too hard to read? Publish large-print editions. Too expensive? Invent the paperbound book. Too drab? Add illustrations. Use lots of color. Too brittle? Use better paper. Too fragile? Take better care of it.

Arguing the relative merits of the electronic book versus the real thing is

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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

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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
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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. 🌿

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