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Issues Vendor/Library Relations -- What Movie Is This Anyway: La Dolce Vita or My Life as a Dog?

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special. Take Field of Vision, for example, a National Book Award winner. It is not a
hard novel to read, unlike those of some
writers I won’t name, but when I finished
reading it, I wondered how he had written it,
technically. His photo essays are stark,
Nebraska depictions, no people, but evoca-
tive of lost souls and lost lives that he writes
about in some of his novels.

While in the Army, a former high school
teacher used to send me care packages of
books and in one package was A Mississippi
River Reader, edited by Wright Morris. It
is a paperback and, for Morris collectors, a
scarce item. My copy has an ink (fountain
pen) notation by Morris’s name, “A Nebras-
kan.” My friend was born in Council Bluffs
but educated in Nebraska. Look at a map
and you will see the connection.

Later, as a graduate student at Berkeley
and working at the Rare Books and Special
Collections Department (now part of the
Bancroft Library), I witnessed Peter
Howard, of Serendipity Books, appraise
stacks of gray archival boxes full of the manu-
scripts of Wright Morris and in our vault,
there were all of the first editions. I had to
read them and from My Uncle Dudley on, I
was an admirer. Morris was teaching at San
Francisco State back then and happily
decided to bless Cal’s library and not
Stanford’s or S.F. State’s, not that they aren’t
worthy institutions but I wasn’t working for
them and would have been deprived of the
glorious sight of those gray boxes.

Move ahead about twenty years and I
found myself inviting Wright Morris to
speak at the annual dinner of the Library
Association of the University of the Pacific
Libraries. I had read his books, had written a fan
letter to him, and now I was going to meet him.

I still have the tape of the talk he gave that
night and some more notes from him but my
favorite memory concerns our talk about Chi-

cago and the errand I undertook on his behalf.

In one of his autobiographical works,
Morris talks about his boyhood experience
at the Larrabee YMCA in Chicago,
Blackhawk and Larrabee, if I remember cor-
rectly. I told him that I would be in Chicago
soon for an ALA conference and would be

glad to visit the Larrabee Y and take some
pictures for him.

I was staying at the Chicago Hilton so
after all my meetings were over, I walked out
front and waited for a cab. Luckily, the cab
driver was a native of Chicago, an African
American of my age, almost exactly. I didn’t
have an address, only an intersection and that
is where I told him I wanted to go. As he
slowly pulled out onto Michigan Avenue, he
asked if I would mind telling him why I
wanted to go there. I told him, he smiled,
and seemed really pleased that I was doing
this for a writer with a homesickness for a
boyhood haunt.

He told me that the neighborhood had
once been mainly Italian but was now Afri-
can American. When we got there, the
YMCA was gone and a magnet high school
sat in its place. There was an abandoned
building, low to the ground, an outbuilding
of some kind, cater corner from the school
and an “EI” track in the distance but other-
wise, just vacant lots. The cab driver asked
if I wanted him to wait while I took my
pictures and I obligingly said yes.

Wright Morris laughed and gently chas-
tised me on the telephone when he called to
tell me for the photographs. I had left my
good Yashica 35mm camera at home, I for-
got it. So I had to use disposable camera
and it was with that that I took the pictures
for a man who had received two Guggenheim
fellowships for his photography.

After my art work was finished, the cab
driver took me to the area’s new YMCA and
then drove me back to the Hilton while tell-
ing me about his boyhood in Chicago, let-
ting me know how much he loved this city,
the city that Wright Morris grew to live in
just a few months and no more, at least not
as a resident.

Wright Morris died last year in his
nineties. I lost contact with him because we
really weren’t friends. I collect his books, I
have a few notes from him, and I have
those memories of a meal and a private
conversation with one of the best of
American writers.

There are other writers in my collection
that I haven’t mentioned and haven’t done
justice to some mentioned here, but they will
have to wait for another time. We can’t all
be writers, but we sure as heck can be readers
and that ain’t all bad.

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Issues in Vendor/Library
Relations — What Movie Is This
Anyway: La Dolce Vita or My
Life as a Dog?

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Column Editor’s Note: Any librarian who makes sales calls on fellow librarians has
earned the right to reflect publicly on the world shared by vendors and librarians. Mark Sandler is Collection Development
Officer at the Graduate Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. — BN

Since 1998, I’ve been moonlighting from my
day job as collection officer at the Uni-
versity of Michigan to promote a joint ini-
tiative between my institution, Oxford Uni-
versity, and ProQuest Information and
Learning. (Writing this column is an exam-
ple of the kinds of promotion I’ve been
done but it’s usually more direct, hard-to-
end combat.) ProQuest owns and markets
digital images of 125,000 volumes of Early
English Books (EEBO) accessible through
searchable MARC records. The vision we’ve
advanced at Michigan is that the academic
community could create a significant num-
ber of searchable and readable full-text ed-
tions of the EEBO works. This subset of
25,000 texts, accurately keyed and tagged in
SGML, is being developed under an agree-
ment with ProQuest that maintains links be-
teen the text and image editions but con-
veys full ownership rights of the text-file to
institutions funding the conversion. The
EEBO-Text Creation Partnership — a coa-
tion of approximately 80 libraries funding
this project — is now seeing some return on
investment in the form of a database of full-
text digital editions. The TCP has set a goal
of 150 partner institutions with total revenue
targeted at $9,000,000. As of this writing, we’re
about halfway there.

So, whether we call it “sales” or “promo-
tion” or “recruitment,” in many ways the
process of rallying the community around a
project like EEBO-TCP emulates what the
commercial information producers and sell-
ers have always done — provide librarians
with information about scholarly resources
and ultimately try to push toward a positive
commitment to buy or subscribe. As a li-
brarian with a materials budget, I’ve spent
years avoiding the best efforts of vendors to
continued on page 77

<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
steer my decisions so it’s interesting to reflect on this brief role reversal. How does the library world look through the vendor lens, and is the work of “selling” rewarding? Are all those folks with blue exhibitor badges at library conferences living the good life — La Dolce Vita — or is it more accurately characterized as My Life as a Dog.

Dolce... As a collection development librarian, I know all about the high living habits of vendors so imagine my excitement at the prospect of sharing in this world. The exciting travel — sometimes in first class. London Online? I’m there. Dinner at some of America’s finest restaurants — just take along a few customers. More wine? No problem. Need a cab? I’ll get that. And on campus in their nice suits (both men and women) and handsome accessories (both men and women) and good haircuts (both men and women). This could be a nice ride, this vendor gig. All I have to remember is to keep my shoes shined.

Dog... Did I tell you about driving in the back seat of a Jetta from Chicago to Urbana-Champaign? Well, it’s tight. And when we arrived we learned that the hotel we were supposed to stay at had overbooked so they comped our night’s stay at a “sister property.” The sister property was a highway motel between a gas station and cornfield but not without some distinctive features: like a bulletproof shield at the “reservations desk.” Since our night was free, there was no concern that we would skip out on the bill but there was considerable concern that we might be making phone calls from our rooms. Hence, every time we attempted to leave the motel (and you would want to leave often), we were called back to review and pay any calling charges before driving out of the parking lot.

Or, how about the night I met up with a ProQuest colleague at Newark Airport to begin a drive to New Haven. We had both skipped dinner but decided to push on through and settle before eating. We arrived in New Haven at midnight and paid for the remaining Popeye Chicken that was just minutes away from being dumpstered. The “restaurant” was closing so we took the food to our hotel. Only folks from New Haven could appreciate how old and dirty and battered the Downtown Holiday Inn is in that city. As I settled in to my room, with Letterman winding down, and cold chicken waiting, I looked in vain for a place where one might consider exposing food to the elements.

And then there was the time we were stuck on 125th St. in New York, wearing very uncool khakis and blazers, suitcases in tow, late for a presentation at Columbia, and gradually coming to realize that the much ballyhooed revival of that famed Harlem street had not yet extended to taxi service. Oh, and how about the 23-hour flight from Sydney to London, sitting in the middle seat, last row where the chairbacks don’t recline but the ones in front sure do. Oh yeah, and the guy on the left is running a fever, coughing, and too sick to eat but apparently not too sick to down a Dewar’s every hour, on the hour (and no, he wasn’t from ProQuest — that guy was on my right).

Dolce... Ask any vendor what they like about their jobs and they’ll say it’s the people they interact with — maybe they don’t mean it but they say it. “The people are so smart and so dedicated, you can’t help but feel privileged working in such an environment.” And, in fact, if there is something I’d point to as compensation for the exceptional commitment my institution has made to the EEBO-TCP, it would be some wonderful professional interactions with people who “just get it” and appreciate it. Collection officers, subject specialists, and library directors who suspended disbelief and risked some significant dollars to pursue a better, albeit untested, model of building and licensing information resources. Librarians and faculty who, on their own initiative, stepped up and lent a hand to define and promote the project. A colleague who extended a public thank-you for our efforts. Library directors willing to speak at a promotional breakfast about the positive impact the project has had for their libraries and campuses. Board members who give time and effort to make this a successful and responsible initiative. You have to feel privileged.

Dog... Day in and day out, the whining about budgets, the lack of time or will to read email, the arcane decision-making structures — more accurately described as “non-decision-making structures.” The skepticism and mistrust and adversarial approach to review and negotiation. And, the sense that, like politics, all decisions are local. No matter what others think or have done, with every institution, every bibliographer, every faculty member, we start from square one with the presupposition that they and only they are in a position to judge the efficacy of an elaborate business plan, SGML tagging schemes, a production and quality control regimen, and all the rest. It is a frustrating environment where a project we believe in deeply is held hostage to some folks who don’t have time, don’t have interest, or just plain don’t have a clue. The conceptually difficult loses out time and time again to the familiar and easy, even if the licensing terms, cost, quality and significance are clearly less advantageous. And while this might seem evident and expected on an institutional level, it has also proven true for too many consortia (but let’s not lump them all together since the CIC, and NERL jumped started this effort and the JISC has been “brilliantly” supportive and creative on behalf of the U.K.). As you can imagine, it’s
great when someone says "yes," but you might be surprised to learn that almost nobody ever says "no." Rather, they say nothing so you have to keep investing and they just keep ducking and dodging. It's a lot of work to keep pumping all those dry holes.

Dolce... Michigan and Oxford must be building quite a lot of infrastructure through this. It must be nice to have an infusion of cash to hire new staff, equip their workplaces, and make decisions about millions of dollars of other people's money. Kind of a rush, actually, to see your vision enacted.

Dog... There are presently nine people paid on EEBO-TCP funds. A content specialist/outreach librarian, five reviewers (three at Michigan and two at Oxford), production coordinators at both institutions (partial appointments) and a programmer (partial). Some of these folks have fall back rights, but six of them depend solely on the project's ability to generate enough revenue to sustain them. There are also an unknown number of folks employed on this project by three international keyboarding firms who need on our continued throughput for their livelihood. Many other staff (technical, bibliographers, legal, P.R., business and finance) from our libraries and campuses are involved — myself included — without compensation from project funds. It is donated time to make a go of an initiative that our library directors believe in. All things considered, it's a lot of obligation leading to a sometimes too personal sense of responsibility and accountability. If I had wanted to run a small business in life, and assume the personal risks of failure, it would make more sense to do it in a way that affords some upside potential beyond the vague ideal of advancing scholarship.

Dolce... The EEBO-Text Creation Partnership started with a vision that culturally important texts could be accurately and intelligently keyed and tagged and that eventually the texts could find their way into the public domain—a real service to scholarship that could extend beyond the bounds of a hundred privileged campuses. The model put forth was to some extent tailored to the content of the corpus but, at root, we always knew that it could be extended to cover the conversion of other historical corpora. When EEBO showed some commercial success for ProQuest, there was indeed interest expressed by others not only in converting some of their extensive microfilm holdings but doing so in conjunction with the EEBO-TCP model that seemingly had a receptive ear in the marketplace. No doubt, it is nice to be in a position to influence the direction of product development on the commercial side. It is a pleasant surprise to discover some very smart and caring folks in these companies who, all things being equal, would prefer to do things that the market wants rather than forever sailing — and selling — into a headwind. And while I say this generally, I would be remiss not to point out that there are outstanding folks at ProQuest that took a risk on our proposed model, worked hard to sell the idea to their own top management, and were willing to accept the consequences if their best judgment turned out to be wrong. I'll cherish these relationships forever.

Dog... I've come to see the commercial producers of scholarly information as a kind of disorganized lot (maybe Elsevier will just buy the rest of them and fix all that). While probably well-meaning, there seems to be a lot they don't know about their market, and in many instances they seem more driven by the needs and demands of content providers and rights holders than of the communities that will buy and use their products (and let me be clear here that the reader shouldn't assume I'm talking about ProQuest — I've had lots of conversations with lots of vendors about moving their content forward). As a group, the vendors suffer from self-imposed isolation that makes it impossible to learn from others — either successes or failures. Without access to information about competitive products that is common knowledge to hundreds of librarians, the vendors seem destined to repeat the mistakes of those that have gone before. While discrete, they appear to take more than a little pleasure in the missteps of their competitors but don't really have the means or will to learn from those experiences. Rather, they blithely assume that their own efforts will be well received by librarians, their OCR will be stunningly accurate, and their servers will never crash. Maybe like all sales cultures, these publishers and vendor rely more on optimistic projections than sober planning and project management.

So, what's the answer? Based on my EEBO-TCP experience would I consider giving up my library job and acquisitions budget in return for spending my days trying to grab a slice of the budgets of others? As I've said above, it's not without its rewards but I wouldn't want to be doing it "for real." For me, it's the lack of control over outcomes that makes selling stressful and unappealing. No matter how hard you work, how pleasant and obsequious you are to your market, how well you dress, in the final analysis you don't control your own destiny. You are dependent on the whims of others and that's a kind of stress that librarians don't need to covet. It's bad enough worrying about your own overflowing in-box, but imagine if your income, job security and identity were tied to the inboxes of ten or twenty or a hundred other people. Be careful what you wish for.

Adventures in Librarianship —
The Dixon Tapes

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If you earned your MLS on or before 1972 you will certainly remember the Carpegate affair that lead to the fall of Dr. Richard Dixon, the Dean of Darkmound University Library. As a result of the Freedom of Information suit brought against the university, the Superior Court of New York has forced the release of thousands of hours of Dixon's recorded phone messages and private meetings. The Dean apparently bugged his own office in an effort to gather evidence against "enemies" he believed were infiltrating the office disguised as custodial staff, work-study students, and management consultants.

The ATG Editorial Board offers the following partial transcript as a cautionary tale to academic library directors who, like Dixon, drink too much coffee and inadequately supervise their serial binding operations. The text is from the April 14th, 1972 meeting between Dean Dixon and his administrative counsel, Rory Haldemensk. This segment of the transcript is often referred to as the "smoking gun."

HALDEMINSK: Sir, we have a problem with the...