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Op Ed — Open Access: Two Caveats

by **Steve McKinzie** (Social Science Librarian, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA 17013; Phone: 717-245-1601)
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The **Open Access** that **Peter Suber** and the **California Digital Library** authors, **John Ober**, **Catherine Candee**, and **Beverlee French**, have so ably defended in this issue of *Against the Grain* has enormous appeal. The movement promises free information at the point of access for anyone who wants it, and it promotes a new economic model for journal publishing, a model built on author rather than reader payment.

But even in an era of expanding journal costs and declining library budgets,¹ one wonders if the wide-spread acceptance of **Open Access** could prove more problematic than beneficial. Consider for a moment two of the movement's more troubling dimensions: the possibility of a compromising long-standing tradition of peer review and the necessity of insisting that authors pay to be published.

Open Access, of course, can accommodate peer review as readily as traditional publishing. Make no mistake about that, but journal publishers (be they not-for-profit or commercial) have long contended that they provide a needed service — a third player in the scholarly communication game. By standing apart from the author and researcher on the one hand and the academy and research community on the other, publishers take a disinterested stance — a neutrality that ensures that only the best and very best becomes published.²

Of course, if men were angels as the saying goes, there would be no need for government — much, I suppose, as if all scholars were scholarly there would be no need for disinterested peer review. But the reality of the human condition warrants checks and balances in politics as much as in publishing.

Now if **Mark Herring** (see this issue's "Red Herring" column, p.88) and **Barbara Fister** (see this issue's "Academic Authors and the Crisis in Publishing," p.48) are right, this peer-review process itself may already be beset with troubling questions of integrity. **Fister** argues that peer-review journals routinely hazard publishing far more than they should, and **Herring** suggests that false data and political correctness sometimes passes for scholarship. Such contentions make it hard to see how discarding one of the authentic safeguards of the apparently suspect process, one of the genuine checks and balances of a possibly tainted system, the third party role of commercial publishing, will do anything but exasperate an already troubled scholarly process.

That brings us to the second troubling dimension of **Open Access**. Authors must pay to have their articles published in an **Open Access** journal. Naturally the income of such journals depends on the number of articles the journal publishes

rather than the number of issues sold. That means that every editor would have the unsavory incentive to print an ever increasing number of articles. It may be that the quality of a journal's scholarship would

remain uncorrupted by such temptations, that editors would never succumb to temptation to publish more than they should,³ and that the caliber of the scholarship would remain high. I am not sure, but I do know that I personally hesitate to embrace wholeheartedly a system that might further jeopardize the already shaky reputation of peer review.

Requiring author payment could similarly jeopardize a commendable democratic or even-handed dimension to current publishing models. In the present typical publishing model, editors and their peer-reviewers are looking for solid authors, for first-rate research. The gates are relatively wide open for submissions. The would-be scholar doesn't have to have funding. The writer doesn't need institutional support. An electronic submission likely costs a contributor nothing, a paper submission no more than the cost of postage. The process places the onus on the journal. However burdensome that procedure may be for the editor and peer-reviewer, it is remarkably freeing to the scholar.

Looking back on my own career, I fancy my

modest publishing efforts may never have seen the light of day had I been forced to seek institutional support in advance. A skeptical research and development committee or a tight-fisted administrator may not have been willing to underwrite a fledgling librarian's feeble attempts. As it was, I had nothing to lose. It was my own effort. Let the peer-reviewers reject it or amend it. It didn't matter. I pestered editors, sent off manuscripts, wrote whenever the notion struck, with no thought about funding, no need to clear my intentions with any committee, and with little care for anyone's approval. Had I come of age in an era of **Open Access** and author charges, I fear the opportunities for professional development might have been far less than they actually were.

Open Access holds great promise — the prospect of extended access, the potential savings for the academy, and the advancement of knowledge for all. But there are also troubling dimensions — aspects of the movement that give me pause — peer review and the author-pay-to-publish model being two of the more salient. Before we abandon an older model, a long-established approach to publishing, one with built-in safeguards and legitimate checks and

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BORN & LIVED: Born in Sweetwater, Texas ... lived in Texas, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Pennsylvania.

FAMILY: Married to **Anna McKinzie**, and live in Carlisle, PA with our four children.

EDUCATION: MLS (**Vanderbilt**), MA History (**East Carolina University**).

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: Came to **Dickinson College** in 1988, where I labored respectively as Documents Librarian, Serials Librarian, and Chair or Director of the Library. I currently serve as the Social Science Librarian for the college. Prior to **Dickinson**, I worked construction, taught school, and attended a variety of graduate programs, earning a M.L.S. from **Vanderbilt** and a M.A. in History from **East Carolina University**.

My research interests include the ongoing interplay of technology and librarianship and librarianship as a profession. I review regularly for the *Journal of Academic Librarianship*.

President, ProQuest Information and Learning

by Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

ATG: *ProQuest has gone through several name changes over the years. How has this affected your marketing operation and positioning in the marketplace? How about your internal organization?*

RK: Over time, our company has successfully transformed from microfilm archiving and aggregation to a digital publisher of all sorts of information for scholarly research. We provide innovative research tools for educational and corporate markets worldwide. I like to think our branding has evolved along with our products — and our customers and associates have been receptive to the changes. ProQuest is a trusted, respected brand.

ATG: *ProQuest (as UMI and Bell & Howell) used to be a microfilm and CD-ROM company. What has the move to electronic resources done to your business positioning?*

RK: We use different methods to anticipate customer needs and changes in the marketplace. We have approximately 250 sales and customer service producers around the world and they do an outstanding job in understanding what is important to customers.

Customers have told us that being able to find and use unique content is important. Specialty electronic publishing — making digital products that are editorially rich and possess unique content, has been a growth area.

ATG: *You came to ProQuest from Dun & Bradstreet. How did/does this influence ProQuest?*

RK: I've found the people at ProQuest to be committed to excellence and customer care. They are very strong customer advocates. I have been told I'm good at leading an organization with thoughtful, selected priorities — priorities that are mapped to our strategy and are executed with speed and simplicity.

Both companies deliver results for shareholders while focusing on customers first — but not at the expense of our third constituency, ProQuest associates (the other two — shareholders and customers). Although D&B is a larger global firm and ProQuest is considerably smaller, the business basics, principles, and values are similar.

ATG: *ProQuest became a public company in the 90s, I believe. How has that changed your business positioning? Are earnings more important to ProQuest than they were when you were a private company?*

RK: Bell & Howell (our former name) was listed on the NYSE in 1995. The name ProQuest Company debuted in June 2001. Many people have invested in our company to create and support our success. We have an obligation to those people to use their money wisely and to generate a reasonable return for the investment they made in us. We have to find a balance in creating value for our customers, a rewarding work environment for our associates and solid financial results for our shareholders.

ATG: *Who are your competitors? Is Ebsco Publishing your main competitor? In terms of your microfilm business, isn't your main competitor yourself?*

RK: We have many competitors, and, frankly, that's a good thing. Businesses always perform better when they have to compete to meet customers' needs.

Rather than focus on what competitors are doing, we focus on what customers want. We've made a great many improvements to the ProQuest interface in the past year — and we continue to add features and improve existing functionality. We work to deliver what our customers want in order to enhance research and learning with features such as expanded date range searching, OpenURL linking, powerful world-class indexing, new ways to group and filter results, and in July, we'll introduce ProQuest Smart Search and email capabilities that will again lead the market. That's on top of our superior content, for which we are also dedicated to providing the best.

We don't see microfilm and digital resources as competitive. Each has its place and librarians value both formats. The content we offer on microfilm is unique. Much of it is not offered electronically and most cannot be found anywhere else.

ATG: *I was recently reading about the instability of CD-ROMs and DVDs as long-term archival media. How stable is microform? As libraries move more and more toward electronic, will ProQuest continue to produce microform? For that matter, how stable is digital media?*

RK: Microfilm lasts for centuries, if stored and treated properly. Librarians value the archival and preservation features of the medium. Despite the growth of electronic products, there is still demand for our microfilm products because they may be the only source of out-of-print information, they're an economical alternative for storing information, and they last a long time. We fully intend to continue to produce microform, and, in fact, we continue to add to our microform product offerings.

Digital media doesn't yet have the track record that microfilm has, but we continue to work on standards committees to help establish best practices and ensure that necessary conversions and updates take place. Technology is ever evolving; as it advances, we intend to stay in the forefront for our customers.

ATG: *You have done many one-time purchase products (APS, EEBO) ... rather than subscription products (current NY Times online). This is good for libraries, but not necessarily good for continuing business. Would you comment on this strategy and its long-term growth potential?*

RK: One of our guiding principles is that if we place the interests of customers first, we will be successful.

We serve many different kinds of libraries with different needs and resources. The largest university libraries find it easiest to fund purchases. Smaller academic libraries,

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balances, we would do well to do so only after prolonged and open debate.

Endnotes

1. Joe Cox, "Where Are the Industry, the Profession and the Art Headed," *Charleston Advisor*, 5, no. 3 (January, 2004) p.51. Cox insists that library expenditures have decreased from an average of four percent of total university expenditure in 1980 to less than three percent today. He insists that "in the quest for funding, librarians have failed to preserve their fair share."
2. Michael Mabe, "Peer Review and Pay to Publish: The World Turned Upside Down," *Against the Grain* (June 2004), p. 3.
3. Elsevier's Comments on Evolutions in Scientific, Technical and Medical Publishing and Reflections on Implications of Open Access Journals for the UK." (February 2004). p.10. http://www.elsevier.com/authorised_news/corporate/images/UKSTIElsevier_position_paper_on_stm_in_UK.pdf.