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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Numbers

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New Year's, as this is written, is a good time for columnists. It's an annual free pass to review, to forecast, to muse, to list, an occasion, each turn-of-year, to paste up a column from the e-snippets and p-snippets accumulated unused over the prior twelve months. Readers have just gotten themselves through another Christmas season. The rigors of the year ahead have not begun. They're tired, enjoying the lull, not looking for much from their columnists.

One way for a columnist to go about it, then, is to find some numbers, some statistics, that purport to say something about the old year. It's perfect. Whatever the topic, nearly always there are numbers somewhere close to hand. An easy column and your readers, to boot, will be grateful to have your numbers. They're hard, they're real, they don't demand much thought, and of course everything now runs by them. Anyone who can remember a number or two can seem in command of a topic.

Last week a link went out over a library listserv to a column by **Henry Kisor**. **Kisor**, an author and also book editor and literary columnist for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, wrote a column rounding up the year's literary news. He noted the deaths of **Saul Bellow**, **Arthur Miller**, and **August Wilson**, then went on to say that "too many new books" are competing for the attention of a "dwindling" number of buyers. He called it a corollary of **Gresham's Law**; meaning, apparently, bad books driving out good. He didn't cite numbers on the dwindling number of buyer-readers, but his numbers on too many books were "almost 200,000," and "14 percent jump."

These particular numbers have done a lot of heavy lifting in our business since last May when they were released by **Bowker**, the publisher of *Books in Print* and official ISBN (International Standard Book Number) agency for the United States. In a numbers-laden press release, **Bowker** announced that 2004 book output in the U.S. had reached 195,000, an increase of 14 percent over 2003. When it comes to U.S. book production these are nearly the only numbers around and therefore are cited frequently. And they will continue to be cited frequently, no doubt, until May 2006 or so, when **Bowker** releases fresh ones.

The numbers are not wrong, I am sure. But they are not right either. They are not quite right for *books*, anyway, since **Bowker**, who is not a bookseller, doesn't count books. As the **Bowker** Website puts it, the company is "North America's leading provider of bibliographic information." Their list of products and services includes databases, link resolvers, **OPAC** enrichment, "promotional services," and "supply chain services." The closest to books **Bowker** gets is "Print Prod-

ucts," which means their own various lines of *Books in Print* and other reference sources.

Bowker's method is to count ISBNs, as submitted to the company by publishers. That's one way of counting books. Simultaneous cloth and hardcover editions of a title count as two. Add an eBook version and you might have three, maybe more. Not to forget large print, and so another. Then there are all the ways a given title might be variously packaged by its publisher. The student edition and the teacher's edition of a textbook. A three-volume set, sold together as a set but also sold volume-by-volume. A reading Bible and a gift edition of the same Bible. A blockbuster novel, translated into Spanish. The scholarly edition and the visitor's edition of a museum catalog. And then, all the titles whose publication is delayed or cancelled which remain ghostly ISBNs in the **Bowker** database. They're counted too.

Even in a relatively quiet section of the book business, like university press publishing, ISBN procreation can beget misleading numbers. According to the **Bowker** press release, "University presses increased their title output 12.3% to 14,484, reversing a 4.3% decline in 2003 ... university presses enjoyed increases in almost all categories, with only philosophy and psychology experiencing significant declines." A hopeful note for the beleaguered UPs? Well, have a look at the respective Websites of **Blackwells** and **YBP**, two companies whose business is to sell actual books. A by-product of this is that **Blackwells** and **YBP** have the chance to count actual new books and both companies, as an aid for their customers, report these book counts every year. Both, for 2004/05, reported about 10,000 new university press books.

Why is the **Bowker** number for university press books nearly 50 percent higher than the **Blackwells-YBP** number? Again, **Bowker** is counting ISBNs, and so is counting some titles more than once. This may be a useful thing, depending upon what the numbers are needed for. If you are following the overall state of the publishing industry, maybe that's the way you'd want your numbers. But if you are in the midst of a budgeting round and you are a university librarian, and so not somebody likely to buy too many titles in more than one version, it's less useful than the let's-count-the-title-just-once method. Or, imagine you are a junior faculty member needing to publish a scholarly book or two

and the members of your tenure committee, having printed out the **Bowker** press release for easy reference, assume that the expanding university presses are begging young academics for manuscripts. Maybe you are off the hook in philosophy and psychology, according to **Bowker**, but otherwise you may be an adjunct hire for the rest of your career.

Apart from double-counting, think of the other components of the **Bowker** total. In order to get to 195,000, which is a big number indeed, **Bowker** counts books (that is, ISBNs) of every kind. It's their business to do that. University press books, for sure, but also children's books, mass market books,

audiobooks, secondary school textbooks, self-published books, *everything*. Or everything with an ISBN anyway, which when it comes to books, amounts to almost everything. Again, depending upon what you need the numbers for, this might be good, to have everything counted. But once more, if you are a librarian engaged in budgeting and planning and not likely to do much buying in most of these categories, using the **Bowker** number in your

figuring is a little like a family working a new update on the Gross National Product into the household budget.

This isn't to pick on **Bowker**, or on **Kisor**, or on anyone. We're all just doing our jobs. But we have different jobs. **Bowker's** job is to record and count bibliographic entities. The bigger the numbers, the more important that job seems to be. **Kisor's** job is to write. When he needs a number, it has to seem authoritative to get mileage out of it. Beyond that, all else being equal for a columnist, big numbers and small numbers — such as whatever the number would be for "dwindling" readers — would seem to highlight the significance of whatever it is being written about. The number itself matters very little.

We all use numbers this way, bibliographic services companies, columnists, vendors, librarians, everyone. We select, we massage, we try to get someone's attention, or to make the best argument, or maybe we only need to fill some space. We can call our numbers "metrics" and suddenly they sound better and even stronger than before. Usually there's a choice of plausible numbers, larger or smaller, according to what the case calls for. Nobody's fibbing, but we can usually find numbers to suit our purpose. We know, like columnists, that someone might challenge your words, but hardly anyone will dare to pick a fight over your numbers. 🍌

