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ATG Special Report -- Are Comic Books A Worthy Consideration on Scholarly Grounds?

Chris Matz

University of Memphis Libraries, cmatz@postoffice.memphis.edu

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IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion)

Why I Won't Pay Twice For Content

by **Rick Anderson** (Director of Resource Acquisition, University of Nevada, Reno, 1664 N. Virginia Street, Reno, NV 89557; Phone: 775-784-6500 x.273; Fax: 775-784-1328) <rickand@unr.edu>

I wrote a letter to the **Warner/Elektra/Atlantic** corporation a few months ago. I explained that during my punk-rocker days in the 1970s and 1980s I had spent a significant amount of money on vinyl records released on that company's **Slash and Sire** imprints, and that I now wanted to get those same titles on compact disc. I provided a complete list of all the vinyl records I had purchased, and asked the label to send me the corresponding CDs at no further charge (though I did offer to pay for shipping). After all, I had already bought the music once — surely the label didn't expect me to pay twice for the same content!

So, what do you think? Was I being reasonable? The folks at **WEA** didn't think so — they told me to go pound sand. They seemed to think that when I purchased those LPs back in the 1970s, I hadn't "bought the music" at all. They thought I had purchased specific representations of the music, and by so doing had acquired certain limited rights of access and use in regard to that music. According to them, those rights did not include the right to receive different representations of the same content at no charge. In other words, they seemed to feel that when I bought Ramones LP, what I had purchased was not the music itself, but an LP — and I didn't have a legitimate claim of ownership to the CD version just because I owned the LP. If I wanted the CD, they said, I was going to have buy one. At full price!

The nerve.

The same thing happened when I told netLibrary I wanted free access to an eBook that I already owned in print, and when I asked the **Walt Disney Corporation** to replace my VHS copy of *The Three Caballeros* with a DVD at no further charge, and when I told **Simon & Schuster** I wanted a free second copy of the new **Ed McBain** novel so I could read it on my lunch hour at work without having to schlep it back and forth to my house.

Well, obviously I never really wrote any such letters, because to do so would be absurd. We all understand that.

Or do we? One of the most common refrains I hear from my colleagues in the profession lately is "I don't want to pay for content twice." It's a comment that comes up most frequently among those who are considering replacing microform archives with online access to the same content.

The sentiment is understandable, of course — it does kind of rankle to shell out what may be a tremendous amount of money for 150 years of, say, *New York Times* backfiles on microfilm and then shell it out all over again for online access to the same news stories. It's especially difficult for us emotionally because when we originally shelled out all that money for micro-

film or microfiche (or, heaven help us, microprint cards), we did so with the expectation that these would be our permanent archival formats. The fact that something better came along is nobody's fault (not even Elsevier's); it's just that it kind of feels like we're being taken advantage of.

We need to resist the temptation to feel that way, because that feeling can lead us to make irrational decisions that hurt our patrons. We need to remember that when we buy access to information, in whatever format, we're not purchasing the information itself; we're paying for a service. When you buy a book, you're paying the author for the service of creating the information, and the publisher for the service of editing, binding and distributing the information. In return, you get a printed copy of that information and the right to do certain things with the book and its contents. One of the things you get to do is keep the book as long as you want. But if you want another copy you're going to have to pay the same amount again, because although it doesn't cost the author any-

thing to have the publishers sup-

ply you with a second copy of what she has already written, the price of the book is mostly a matter of covering services provided by the publisher.

When we consider whether or not to shell out a large amount of money for online access to content that we already own in some other format, the main question we ask ourselves should not be "Do we already own this content?" but rather "Is the service being offered worth the price to us?" When **ProQuest** offers online access to the historical archive of the *New York Times* it is not, in fact, offering the same service as it did when it offered that same content on microfilm. Of course, if you own the microfilm already, this will make the online version somewhat less valuable than it might be to a library that has never had access to the backfiles before. Companies like **ProQuest** recognize this, and they generally offer discounts that reflect that understanding.

Now understand, I'm not arguing that all of us "ought" to buy online access to everything we currently own in physical formats. Sometimes the price for the service is too high, or the content is too marginal, or your patrons' need for enhanced accessibility simply isn't great enough to justify the cost of online access. What I am saying is that we need to get over the idea that there's something intrinsically wrong with "paying for content twice." The fact is that we don't "own" the content in our collections at all, so there's no way to pay for it twice. What we pay for is the service that publishers and authors provide, and a different format means a different service. 🌿

ATG Special Report — Are Comic Books A Worthy Consideration on Scholarly Grounds?

by **Chris Matz** (Collection Development, University of Memphis Libraries; Phone: 901-678-8244) <cmatz@postoffice.memphis.edu>

In this era of cuts, drops, and discontinuations, it is both possible and desirable for academic librarians to incorporate new resources into their collections. One possibility is to support the emerging scholarly interest in comic books, both as popular culture icons and as supplements to established curriculum. Yet academic libraries have been slow to support their inclusion, lagging far behind their peers in public library settings. Why might this be?

The fact that many of you are scrunching up your faces (presuming you've stuck with the article this far) at the very notion of spending valuable professional energy on comic books contributes greatly to this gap in collections. The challenge to alter the conventional perception of comic books as trashy and juvenile is considerable, a perception that is codified within narrow collection development policies and limited range of experience in technical services departments.

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Faculty doesn't want comic books, it's hard to know which ones to buy and from where, it's too difficult to process them and keep them from being stolen once processed — if these arguments sound familiar, they're the same ones librarians utter every time we're faced with something new. Replace *comic books* with *CD-ROMs* or *electronic journals* in the previous sentence, and you'll recognize the pattern. It may very well be that your library isn't interested in comic books for perfectly valid reasons and that's fine, but to dismiss an entire resource format based on an unwillingness to learn more about it is the behavior we associate with IT or administrators or patrons. As librarians, we can do better. Consider this exercise a renewal of the critical thinking we used to rave about in library school research papers, if you will.

Comic books are very much worthy of consideration on scholarly grounds. **Marshall McLuhan** identified them as cool because readers must imagine the action between panels, and so comic books can be seen as sequential art narratives that enhance cognition and perception like no other medium. As critiqued more recently by **Scott McCloud**, comic books are innovative semiotic expressions with a broad appeal to humanities scholarship at the very least. Faculty from a vast cross-section of academic disciplines would find such a medium scholarly and valid.

Academic value alone is not enough, of course; it is crucial to consider specific collection development concerns for any comic book collection. Any academic library that does not at present include comic books within its development policies must first carefully assess itself before seeking to incorporate the medium into its collections. As acquisition budgets diminish, librarians must be able to articulate the value of comic books to the library, and as with other learning resources, this is best done in conjunction with faculty already engaged in their use. The most meaningful development policies have always come when librarians and faculty work together.

Presuming strong faculty relations to drive or inform the collection process, librarians must identify adequate tools for evaluation of comic books to meet research needs. Just as there is a review serial for every academic discipline, *The Comics Journal* has provided criticism and evaluation of titles (mostly non-superhero comic books, the genres more likely to be collected in academic libraries) since the 1970's. Library science journals and reference sources are beginning to include comic books in their review sections. Many of the titles evaluated there tend to be geared toward the Young Adult collections of public libraries; this does create a baseline acceptance for the medium, but it can perpetuate the marginalization of comic books as juvenile fare.

However, in its 1998 series "Comic Books and Libraries," *Serials Review* published extensive guides for all libraries to the four largest American publishers, all of which now offer comprehensive lines of library-friendly formats

like graphic novels (original work under one cover) and trade paperbacks (republished collections of periodical titles). The *New York Times Book Review* and *Entertainment Weekly* now regularly devote evaluative coverage to comic books from many different publishers, often promoting the growing number of academic titles studying comic books and comic art (led by the **University Press of Mississippi**) as well as histories of the medium, though to be sure, the latter have mostly tended to be general-interest rather than scholarly in their scope.

The recent boom of graphic novels and trade paperbacks has created a format for reprints of rare and expensive primary comic books, available within almost any budgetary limits. **DC Comics** is producing prestige "archive editions" of historic titles such as

1950's-era *MAD Magazine*, **Will Eisner's** *The Spirit*, and **Joe Kubert's** *Sgt. Rock*. DC also publishes more contemporary trade paperbacks like **Neil Gaiman's** *Sandman* series, **Frank Miller's** *The Dark Knight Returns*, and **Alan Moore's** *Watchmen*, still in print almost twenty years after they first appeared.

Fantagraphics publishes collections by notable creators such as **Daniel Clowes** (*Eightball*, *Ghost World*), **Robert Crumb** (*Fritz the Cat*, *Self Loathing Comics*), and the **Hernandez** brothers (*Love & Rockets*). Nearly all comic book publishers now offer their contemporary periodicals as loss leaders for planned trade paperbacks, with narrative arcs matching up to the 90-120 pages that fit comfortably between two covers. **AIT/PlanetLar** is remarkable for eschewing periodicals altogether in favor of original graphic novels, as with their *Astronauts In Trouble* series; this may soon become the business model for publishers without the financial resources to sustain both formats.

At the **University of Memphis**, cultivation of a comic book collection began in earnest in September 2002. The Collection Development librarian had already performed a cursory review of comic books and other comics-related materials, but it was not until he was approached by the Department of English's faculty chair that a serious evaluation took place. The long-range goal of attracting Ph.D.-level research would necessitate a vast upgrade in resources. The holdings to that point reflected a variety of academic studies of the medium along with several of the standard texts for the chair's *Visual and Verbal Texts: The Graphic Novel* graduate course — or more precisely, the library catalog reflected those holdings. In fact, many of the titles listed were not found and later declared lost, requiring replacement copies. Budgetary restrictions prevented the Department of English or Collection Development from immediately plugging these holes.

The **Friends of The Library** organization for the **University of Memphis Libraries**, though, was responsive to a solicitation for a \$500 monthly purchasing stipend for six consecutive months. This infusion provided the fi-

nancial means to supplement missing holdings while other related titles (such as original works by **Lynda Barry**, **George Herriman**, and **Lynd Ward** along with academic studies by **David Carrier**, **Ron Goulart**, and **Trina Robbins**) already in the collection were pulled from general circulation and placed onto reserve, creating a greatly expanded "recommended" reading list for the *Visual and Verbal Texts* course.

Serving the access needs of patrons is a task tempered by the high rate of missing and lost comic book titles. Selected original works remained on "permanent reserve" at the conclusion of the semester, though the reserve holdings themselves will be expanded for the entire library in August 2003 and those comic book titles will be shelved in an area of the reserves room that can be browsed without the assistance of library staff.

The retention results of this experiment will be examined closely.

While the comic book collection will probably not achieve the remarkable growth of 2002-03 every year, there will be a modest and steady stream of requests coming from the Department of English as its faculty begins to tap the scholarly potential of the medium. Participation in collection building will be expanded to include Fine Arts and any number of disciplines within the social sciences; individual instructors are already using **Art Spiegelman's** *Maus* series and **Joe Sacco's** *Palestine* and *Safe Area Gorazde* for history and political science classes, respectively, while the University's Special Collections archive was eager to add the third volume of **Ho Che Anderson's** *KING* to the first two they already owned. Promotion of existing holdings will help reorient outstanding biases against comic books in an academic setting. A display of featured titles all throughout the summer of 2003 highlighted the aesthetic qualities of the medium, and the effort received a positive write-up in the Memphis (TN) *Commercial Appeal*. Consideration will be given to inviting comic book creators for campus events like the Department of English's "River City Writers Series" for formal presentations and readings.

A recognizable context for comic books as a serious scholarly interest is beginning to emerge, and the **University of Memphis Libraries** intend to support that aspect of the curriculum. Their development policy for collecting comic books will not only inform the library's selections but also serve as hard evidence of synergy between faculty and librarians. Scholars understand comic books can represent a form of literacy unique from text or art by themselves, and many of them predict that distinction will become increasingly important in our culture. One or two of these "radical" instructors surely reside on every college campus, and allied with the power of critical thinking practiced by development librarians, academic collections can be on the brink of a remarkable transformation; that is, if faculty and librarians together desire such a transformation. 🌱