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IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion) -- Why I Won't Pay Twice for Content

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IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion)

Why I Won't Pay Twice For Content

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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?

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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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