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ATG Interviews Michael Cairns

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Managing Partner, Information Media Partners

by Dennis Brunning (E Humanities Development Librarian, Arizona State University) <dennis.brunning@gmail.com>

Column Editor's Note: Michael Cairns is Managing Partner of Information Media Partners. He has over 20 years experience in the publishing industry including upper management positions at Bowker and PricewaterhouseCoopers. Since 2006 he has consulted and advised media companies expanding in a rapidly changing business environment. He blogs on publishing at <http://infomediapartners.blogspot.com/>.

Recently Michael posted a compelling white paper on electronic book publishing in an era of Google. "Database of Riches" analyses the Google Book Settlement and its promise for the publishing industry. ATG caught up with Michael for a few questions. — DB

ATG: For academic libraries your market study suggests that \$55,000 may be the pricing point for an institutional subscription. For many librarians, what Google proposes to charge will be the deciding factor. How did you come up with this figure?

Michael Cairns: I based it on a best guess estimate using my prior experience selling database products into the library market. There are considerable unknowns here (obviously), but I made some judgements of valuation, and that's what I have come up with. Some people responding to my article suggest I am far on the low side others think I am high.

ATG: Generally, what amount do you figure librarians won't pay — especially those who find the \$55,000 figure good?

MC: As with any database this is going to come down to utility for all libraries and assuming they make a judgement together with their faculty that this is something they need, then they will find the money. I constructed my model so that I assume that penetration into smaller libraries will be less than it will be at the larger institutions.

ATG: Your market analysis looks at the Google Book database whose content ends on books scanned prior to the effective date of the Google Book Settlement. Going forward, do academic libraries participate in new content at your price point of \$55,000?

MC: My understanding is that there is no accommodation for new content. However, I don't think it is inconceivable that in the future the parties could come to some agreement to include more recent content, especially if it is in the collective interests. The GBS product could be seen as the ideal way for publishers to make accessible all their titles into the library market. That scenario represents a "what if," however.

ATG: Some librarians are perplexed by Google's take on copyright. We find it hard to imagine any of us participating in a project

to electronically copy an entire work in copyright and claim we are on the right side of the law. Does your analysis assume copyright law will support Google's new model?

MC: This is a question some have placed at the center of the controversy over approval of the settlement. My analysis assumes the settlement will be approved.

ATG: In librarian and publisher forums there is some talk of "library by-pass." Many think that the Google Library Book project provides too much convenience for the end-user to even consider using a library, let alone pondering its civic and practical role in their lives. Does this almost guarantee we must subscribe to the Google book database?

MC: I don't think that's solely a GBS issue and in any case one of the points I make in my document is that organizing this content so that users can find what they need — and this requires better bibliographic information, curation of the content, taxonomies, etc. — will be very important. I think in that context the role of the library and librarian will be an important factor.

ATG: In your marketing paper and on your blog you discuss, conceptually at least, new publishing opportunities that the Google Book Project will give to publishers and libraries. Can you elaborate on some? Will these opportunities be enough to build a business or promote libraries?

MC: Pass on this one.

ATG: You debunk some claims that critics advance about orphaned works. You argue that the numbers just aren't correct and there has been some lazy thinking and journalism afoot. Tell us more about this — why arguments against the settlement shouldn't turn on these matters.

MC: There are Orphan works but the numbers being suggested from the outset of this argument were not remotely discussed rationally. The initial thinking behind this analysis was presented by my ex-colleague Andrew Grabois (who ran editorial at Bowker) in a response to a paper presented by OCLC. All I did was think about how many unique books had been published since the 1920s and determined by estimate on the basis that you couldn't have more Orphans than works published.

ATG: University of Michigan, Sergey Brin's alma mater, supplied most of the books Google scanned to reach critical mass. A number of major academic libraries, initially involved in the project, stepped back participation. Harvard was one, Stanford another. The concern seemed primarily over copyright. As private institutions, they could not risk lawsuits over intellectual property ownership. As a state institution, University of Michigan felt less at risk. Under old copy-

right law, this would seem a sticky situation. Does the Google Book Settlement help resolve all of this?

MC: I'm not the expert here, but I believe the short answer is no. We need Congress to address the copyright issues — both for Orphan legislation and for the more broader aspects of the changed copyright needs in the internet world. I don't have much hope about that however.

ATG: Most librarians and serious users would probably agree with you that the Google Book Project is a database of riches and too important to scholarship to shipwreck over copyright issues. That said, it seems critical to evolve a new era for academic publishing that allows all players — libraries, publishers, distributors — a level playing field in the market. Comment?

MC: Who could disagree with that? But the statement has implications far beyond GBS. I do think that this database will allow libraries that were unable to build collections on scale with larger institutions the chance to provide their students and academics with a valuable resource they wouldn't have been able to provide otherwise; however, "uneven access" for copyright materials, database, and journal publishing etc., all contribute to the bumpy playing field. Open access publishing and similar initiatives provide some answers, but whether they level the field effectively probably depends on your perspective.

ATG: You propose an interesting "what if" for major library vendors. You suggest that Google's sales distribution could be through the major players (Proquest, EBSCO, Cengage) and more — and this is the most tantalizing suggestion — that Google might gain access to index supplied by third party sales partners. What would it take across the industry for this to happen? How would it not happen?

MC: I would only see this happening if Google strikes a deal with these partners and is able to convince them of the value of building a product (or modules) that can interact with each other. If a user finds a book in the GBS database enabling indexing of more recent and relevant materials available in the ProQuest database, for example, it would be immediately recognized as value-add by all partners. All parties want their databases to be used, and this kind of interlacing of functionality would drive usage for each participant. Don't forget Google can add Google Scholar and, in the summer, Google Editions to the mix, as well. The future starts to look very interesting for books.

Your links: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/30334705/A-Database-of-Riches-Michael-Cairns>. 