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A Dialogue on PDA

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Editor's Note: How does patron-driven acquisition (PDA) affect the scholarly marketplace? How will PDA affect university presses?

Two of the leading voices on the topic, **Sandy Thatcher** and **Rick Anderson**, have recently been discussing these questions. In a conversation initiated by **Sandy's** revision of his **Charleston Conference** presentation titled "Back to the Future: Old Models for New Challenges"(**Against the Grain**, February 2011), the two have been exploring the challenges and opportunities posed by PDA.

Sandy's position, in brief, is that PDA can potentially cause significant problems for university presses. To begin with, PDA can reduce immediate cash flow to publishers as orders for books are extended over a longer period of time compared with revenue generated from traditional approval plans. It is also possible that PDA will result in a lower number of sales overall, as evidence shows that many monographs on library shelves never circulate. For his part, **Rick** feels that the programmatic acquisition of library books that are never used may be too high a price to pay for the support of university presses. If these (or any other) presses are publishing books that no one wants to use, the solution is probably for those presses to publish different books rather than to insist that libraries purchase the ones no one wants.

Let the debate begin! — *XA*

ST: If PDA means to insert the market in a more crass commercial sense into the process, then it is undermining the core values on which university press publishing is based. If you read any history of university press publishing, you will understand that presses were founded because there was an insufficient market demand for scholarly works. In that very same sense, there is an insufficient market demand today. It appears that PDA will only exacerbate this market-oriented element of the winnowing system, adding to the market-driven distortions that have already entered into the system by way of press acquiring editors sorting through prospective books by criteria of sales potential rather than scholarly merit alone. The system already has gone pretty far in this direction; PDA may force it over the cliff — and into oblivion. If everything is to be commercialized in this sense, then we don't need university presses at all. Commercial academic publishers will already be making their decisions on grounds of perceived market demand, and truly ground-breaking works of scholarship with perhaps initially small audiences will go unpublished — or migrate to IRs. I do not see this as a step forward in the system, but rather as a further

catering to commercialization, which has gone a long way to infect the whole environment of higher education already (witness big-time college sports).

RA: So in other words, if I understand your argument: UPs exist to publish very good books that few, if any, may want to read. They do so because the world of academe (and therefore, by extension, the world generally) benefits from having excellent works of scholarship out there and available, whether or not the commercial marketplace would support those works' production and distribution. Is that a fair summation?

If so, then this is my response: I support that mission. The problem is that my ability to translate that support into purchases of UP books is limited — and it's now more limited than ever. So, like most libraries, I have to make very difficult choices: much as I might like to, I can't afford to buy all of the excellent works of scholarship that are being published by UPs. So I need a good mechanism for choosing between them. Librarian speculation (whether expressed programmatically by means of librarian-designed approval plans or on a per-title basis by means of firm orders) leads both to the purchase of books that my particular patrons don't want, and to the non-purchase of books that they do want. This is a problem. It was a problem I could live with when my budgets were relatively flush, but drastic budget cuts make the problem much more acute and a solution much more urgently needed. I can't keep buying books for my particular library that my particular patrons don't want.

Ultimately, the needs of scholars are what define the market demand for scholarship. The philosophical question is: if an objectively excellent work of scholarship is never used by a scholar, should it have been published? I don't know if I can answer that. But I can definitely answer this question: if an objectively excellent work of scholarship is purchased by my library and never used by one of my patrons, should my library have purchased it? The answer is no.

ST: Here is another argument for a different kind of rational decision-making applying PDA selectively. Since librarians know that university presses pursue rigorous peer-review procedures, but do not know what kind of peer review is conducted by commercial academic publishers, why would it not be rational for a library building a collection in, say, Latin American studies to instruct their vendors to purchase every monograph published in that field issued by a university press?

PDA could then be applied to all commercially published academic titles in the field. Because it is impossible to know how commercial academic publishers reach their decisions,

and if and how much peer review they engage in, it is reasonable not to trust their imprints as guarantees of quality. I might add that university presses also have faculty editorial boards involved in the process, which have no counterpart at all in commercial publishing and yet play an important role in the process for university presses. In fact, it is precisely the editorial board composed of faculty acting as generalists, not specialists, who are likely to raise the question of "do we really need another book on this subject?" and thus serve as a filter for counteracting excessive bias from specialist reviewers.

Libraries profess to be concerned about the fate of university press publishing, and they have good reason to do so. The prices of monographs published by presses are generally well below commercial prices (as documented by economist **Al Greco** in his studies of the scholarly publishing industry), and this is so not only because of university subsidies to their presses but also because of the generally lower overheads that presses have (not being located in major metropolitan areas with expensive real estate, for instance). Librarians know that to be a member of the **AAUP** a press is obliged to follow certain procedures of validation, and thus their imprints can be trusted in a way that commercial imprints cannot. The failure of university presses will leave the market for books to commercial publishers, who will then end up creating the same kind of escalating price environment as they have for STM journals.

Can you give me a good reason why PDA should not be applied in this way?

RA: Because my patrons need access to more than just rigorously peer-reviewed books — they also need access to books that aren't peer-reviewed and, in some cases, to books that aren't even of very high quality. And on top of that, they don't need access to all rigorously-peer-reviewed books, only to those that are relevant to their research interests; doing research is more than just a process of reading very good books. Your suggestion assumes that my library's goal should be to get every high-quality book into its collection, but that's not my library's goal. My library's goal is to meet the research needs of its patrons, and those needs are incredibly broad and varied.

For you, this whole issue seems to be less about library collections than about the health and vigor of the scholarly communication system as a whole — you've said or implied repeatedly that it's okay for libraries to purchase and house irrelevant but high-quality books, because by doing so they contribute to the survival of the UP, and the survival of the UP

is necessary to the system's health and vigor. I'm not sure the reality is that clear-cut, but for the sake of this discussion let's say that it's true — that if the UP goes away, the system is irreparably damaged. The question remains whether that reality entails a responsibility on the part of libraries to prop up the system by buying books that their patrons don't need. Doing so simply amounts to a redirected subvention; instead of (or as well as) the UP's host university supporting the press in its creation of new scholarship, the library at another institution supports the UP by paying it for a service the library doesn't need. Your argument is that the library benefits from doing so in a real but indirect way, by helping to ensure the ongoing health and vigor of the system (and when libraries fail to do so, they act as "free riders," which I still maintain is fundamentally incorrect). But even if it were true, that same argument could be made by many other players in the system, some of whom create scholarly products that are actually heavily demanded by my library's researchers. Given that every dollar I give to one player in the system is a dollar I can't give to another, why does it make sense for me to support a player who produces stuff I don't need rather than one who produces stuff that I do? (And the response that "UPs create products that are uniquely valuable and essential to the integrity of the system" won't cut it, because, again, lots of players — including for-profit publishers — create products that are also uniquely valuable and also important to the system, both for their quality AND for their relevance to my patrons' needs.)

ST: You make excellent points here, and I'm inclined to alter my argument as follows.

Instead of placing the burden of sustaining the university press system on librarians, I should properly place it on top university administrators (presidents and provosts) collectively. This would be in keeping with my argument in "Dissertations into Books?" (*Against the Grain*, April 2007) that the separate actors in the system are all acting rationally within their own spheres, but the result overall is dysfunctionality for the system as a whole. It is the responsibility of top administrators to fix this situation. Those of us at the lower levels can't be expected to act in ways that betray our own immediate responsibilities and priorities. So my message was misdirected in being targeted at librarians.

You're quite right that there is disagreement among the experts about what constitutes high quality. Not infrequently, we acquiring editors will have different experts make opposing recommendations, which we usually then resolve by going for a tie-breaking third report. And of course commercial publishers do publish many important books of high quality.

I will confine my claim to this one point: only university presses can guarantee customers that the books they publish have been put through a rigorous peer-review process. (You're right that this is not equivalent to a guarantee of quality, but at least it establishes a prima facie case for it.) How is this known? Because no press can be a member of the **AAUP** unless it adheres to

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FAMILY: Husband, **Steve**; son, **Tom**, 23 years old.
IN MY SPARE TIME: Cook, sew; watch movies.
FAVORITE BOOKS: Anything by **Jane Austen** or on American social history.
PET PEEVES: Catalogers singled out for criticism at professional meetings.
PHILOSOPHY: It will work out.
MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: I hope it's the successful DDA pilot.
GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: To sit in my new office in our remodeled library (in the planning stages) working on CD issues.
HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Blended collections, print and electronic, with a continued growth in providing just-in-time services. 🐿

the by-laws of the **Association**, which mandate that a system of review of this sort take place. Commercial publishers may consult expert reviewers (and as an acquiring editor for **Lynne Rienner** now I am using just the same kinds of reviewers as I did at **Princeton** or **Penn State**), but no customer — librarian or scholar — can know for certain that such a review process has occurred, and of course there can be no counterpart in commercial publishing to the role of the faculty editorial board.

My argument, then, boils down to these two claims: 1) there is something uniquely valuable about the peer-review system operated by university presses that is worth saving; and 2) it is ultimately the responsibility of university administrators to do what is necessary to save this system. Notice that these claims are entirely neutral with respect to publishing business model. Indeed, I would argue that OA would better support the ideal of university press publishing now than would a continuation of the market-based model.

RA: I can see the logic behind this point. If universities want to support the production and wide distribution of scholarship, then maybe they need to do more than just produce scholarship. Of course this means, inevitably, additional investment: as I continue (fruitlessly) reminding OA evangelists, a dollar that supports the production of research cannot also then be spent on the significant projects of 1) turning research data into publishable info products and 2) distributing them. Money that is redirected in those ways will not be available for the support of future research, and the end result will be less research, distributed more widely. (None of this is to say that the tradeoff is necessarily bad, only that it must be kept in mind if our decisions are going to be reality-based. If we

make decisions based solely on how nice it is for everyone to have access, then we may well end up hurting more than we help.)

The problem, of course, is that university administrators are constrained by the same fiscal realities as libraries are. Money earmarked to support publication of books that may or may not be wanted by anyone is money that can't be used to refurbish physics labs or hire faculty or build classrooms. For administrators, as for librarians, it won't always be wise to put quality above relevance and local need. Is another 500-page treatment of *La Morte d'Arthur*, even a very good one, necessarily more important to the scholarly enterprise than classroom space for, say, two more students? I don't know the answer to that one.

*Xan: Any concluding remarks, **Sandy** and **Rick**?*

ST: The result of this conversation would appear to be that both libraries and university presses have good reasons to be concerned about current developments in the dissemination of scholarship, and that their own strategies for survival, which are rational when viewed from their different perspectives, may end up conflicting at a system-wide level. But as **Rick Anderson** nicely puts the point in his final comments, this is a problem that is ultimately one for top university administrators to solve as they balance many competing demands on limited resources. Librarians and presses may agree in emphasizing the primacy of supporting and disseminating scholarship and providing service to faculty and students as preeminent among the missions universities are meant to fulfill, but realistically administrators have alumni, state and federal legislators, sports boosters, and many other constituencies to satisfy also.

A Publisher's Perspective on PDA

by **Rebecca Seger** (Institutional Sales Director, Americas, Oxford University Press) <Rebecca.Seger@oup.com>

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By now it has become clear that patron-driven acquisition (PDA), or demand-driven acquisition, has evolved as a concept into a full-fledged viable option for book acquisition in academic libraries. The notion of paying only for books that get real, demonstrated use, makes sense in today's climate and the forces driving it, enumerated previously in the pages of this very journal, at session upon session at every library conference, and by many of the thought leaders in the library world, are simply too sound for PDA not to be a wholly logical solution to some of the issues currently plaguing the academic library: budget cuts, an ever-larger share of these smaller budgets being allocated to serials, stark statistics demonstrating the low use of print monographs acquired via traditional approval plans, and perhaps a greater accountability on the part of the library to show return on investment (ROI). All of these and more have positioned the PDA model as leading the vanguard of a revolution in the way in which scholarly content is both perceived and acquired by librarians.

But most of what we've read and heard to date has much to do with libraries and with the aggregators' models and very little to do with publishers, or, for that matter, with the Academy. Libraries, publishers, and the Academy, like it or not, are deeply enmeshed in a symbiotic relationship, and abiding change for any one of us will naturally result in abiding changes for all. If the acquisition model is radically different five years from now then we are bound to see radical differences in both Publishing and the Academy. As with all radical market shifts, there are going to be gains and losses and, quite possibly, winners and losers. It goes without saying that PDA will have an impact on how academic publishers conduct business and there is potential, too, for a domino effect with regard to both academic libraries and the scholars they serve.

How Might PDA Affect our Business as Publishers of Scholarly Content?

At this point, it is irrelevant at this point to be "for" or "against" PDA. The more important issue is how to adjust our business as this model gains broader acceptance in the marketplace. We are now all quite used to the canard, oft perpetuated by the media, that Publishers live in abject fear of the changes taking place, and certainly there is a great deal of uncertainty in the market right now. But the pace of change has accelerated as well recently so we're not talking about major technological breakthroughs in the same way we used to when, for example, it was discovered that trains were a significant advance over the stagecoach. Change is happening monthly, weekly, almost daily, and that's a disorienting concept, at both the individual and the organizational level.

Should we, as publishers, be worried about what PDA might mean for future sales of academic content? We'd be foolish not to be, as our business model has been in place for decades with relatively little

change. "Just in case" acquisition of scholarly content has formed the bedrock of both university press (UP) and commercial academic press sales and has allowed for experimentation and risk-taking in other areas of our businesses. At **OUP**, as the publisher of well over 1,000 academic monographs annually, it's vital that we constantly examine the implications of this model to our business to ensure that we are able to survive, and indeed thrive, in a PDA world.

We understand why patron-driven acquisition as a model is attractive to libraries — only pay for what gets used, yet offer up to your user the same selection of titles, and more than likely an expanded list. Almost all of the librarians we've spoken with say they are perfectly happy to pay for what gets used but are tired of paying for what doesn't. So PDA is effectively turning our existing monograph sales model right on its head. Publishers have long relied on the fact that many libraries would purchase some to most of what we published, and the end result of that is a stable base of sales on which we could continue to seek out, edit, and publish important scholarly works for the global scholarly community. So where do we go from here, what are the right questions to be asking, and are there potentially positive outcomes?

PDA and Scholarship

As a university press, we essentially have two distinct constituents: libraries and academics. Within the Academy the credentialization process has been effectively outsourced to presses like **OUP**. Tenure, promotion, and other forms of advancement within the academy are predicated on what scholars publish, and real change to this system has yet to appear. But could PDA mean that fewer monographs are bought? If that turns out to be the case, it is inevitable that fewer monographs will be published. How would scholars compensate for what may be a smaller pool of publishing options as publishers become less willing to invest in the truly scholarly monograph?

Usage statistics on e-monographs will provide another interesting new means by which publishers may shape future acquisitions and thus influence the state of scholarship across disciplines. What chapters and content do they access? What search queries are not being met with good results, therefore showing a demand for new areas? Which disciplines demonstrate the greatest growth? Where are users going after they find their search results? How much are journal articles used in conjunction with print books, and how can we use that information to build new content connections? We need to know about the end user and what they are interested in, as the answers to these questions will provide publishers with more information about how their content is being used than was ever before imaginable in the old print environment. But publishers, librarians, and academics, need to be aware of the risks as well as the rewards and be aware of the potential for publishers to steer programs toward disciplines that are more heavily accessed.

The Role of Discoverability in Purchasing and a Shift to End-User Marketing

In a demand-driven world, the publishers who will have a more successful transition are the ones who do their utmost to ensure their content is being "driven to" at all points of the research spectrum. Discoverability through enhanced metadata is of key importance and it is truly up to publishers to drive the discoverability of their books.

One of the most obvious limitations of the monograph in print form, and certainly a contributor to low use, is the limitation of the printed book as a format for discoverability and the few options the end user has for finding information on the content. Before the advent of eBooks, users relied on the OPAC's limited tools for discoverability: subject coding, book title, author, and to a certain extent where available, the TOC. But how good is a book title at describing everything a book contains?

RA: And even if those other constituencies did not need to be satisfied, the requirements of genuine scholarship will almost always outstrip the resources available, leaving university administrators with extremely difficult decisions to make when allocating those resources among various deserving constituencies. 🐾

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*Do you have something to add? Join the debate on the Multigrain forum on the **Against the Grain Website** (http://www.against-the-grain.com/2011/02/multigrain-pda-stewardship/).*