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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- You Kicked Our...Bible

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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — You Kicked Our ... Bible

Column Editor: **Bob Nardini** (Group Director, Client Integration and Head Bibliographer, Coutts Information Services) <bnardini@couttsinfo.com>

This past week I arranged a string of meetings for someone just hired at our company. The idea was to help her get oriented by talking to people in different departments. As I walked back into the room during a break in one of these meetings, she'd struck up conversation with someone from the department and was sharing a laugh. These new colleagues turned out to be old competitors.

"You kicked our butt," she said to him.

"Yes," he agreed, "we did."

It was Bibles they were talking about. Each had worked for a religious publisher with an online Bible, and they'd both been involved in these respective Bible projects. In this shared calling to publish Bibles the two companies might have had an identical larger purpose at heart, but the smaller purpose seems to have been to sell as many as you could. One company apparently had reached more souls online than the other had managed to reach.

Selling Bibles is hard business. You're always being tested. My new colleague used to show her online Bible at conventions around the United States. Every so often a Biblical scholar would walk up to the booth and start talking to her — in Hebrew. "They just wanted to see," she says, "if you knew it." The *New Yorker* even ran an article on the Bible business a few years ago, detailing the market's astounding variety — study Bibles, family Bibles, gift Bibles, devotional Bibles, and every other kind of Bible; thumb-indexed, gold-embossed, or leather-bound; in this translation or that translation.

I thought it must be the same for these two online Bibles, that one had the right features and the other didn't. "No," I learned in asking, "they were the same." What made the difference, then? One publisher had licensed its Bible to another company and the other publisher hadn't. Instead that Bible was offered only on the publisher's site.

Not so long ago in the online world a phrase you'd hear fairly regularly was "content is king." **Bill Gates** wrote something to that effect in the mid-1990s, when online content was still building up. Lots of people borrowed his phrase. Now there's so much content — so many Bibles, so much of everything — that content has been knocked off the throne. Content? Heck, there's still plenty of that in print, if anyone really needs something in particular. Content, move over. Today context is king.

Can people get to *your* Bible more easily than they can get to someone else's? Can you put it somewhere where they're liable to be spending time anyway?

How well will yours fit with other "content," if our pre-eminent public domain work can be thought of that way? Maybe you will need to share your Bible with some other company or companies who were not present at the creation, your creation that is. Questions like these might be more important than having whatever the online equivalent is to a great thumb-index feature, since everyone else's Bible is going to have some version of that feature anyway.

The boundaries we know in the terrestrial world evaporate like mist when you put content online. It's the trickiest thing, and not just for publishers and other businesses. In fact the best show in town right now might be to watch the interplay among one online for-profit colossus, **Google**, who runs a little side business digitizing books, two decidedly not-for-profit groups trying to put the world of content online, and a couple of as-yet-unborn "national digital library" visions.

It wouldn't be easy to find a better icon of capitalism as we know it today than **Google**. Yet to millions around the world, **Google** is nothing like the other gigantic corporations who drill oil, or fly planes, or lend money, or make cars, or broadcast news, or run big box stores. While at times some people may love some of them, these companies are just as easy to not love, an approach most of us have taken at one moment or another at least. **Google**, on the other hand, seems like a gift sent down from the heavens a few years ago to make life on earth better for everyone, and not to forget, someone we don't pay a dime to.

That's not a view taken by the **Open Content Alliance**, by the way. The **OCA** is a collaborative organization free of commercial motives whose project is to create a universal online commons of books and other things. Among the comments about **Google** you can find on the **OCA** Website is a 2009 posting about the **Google Book Settlement**, "an insider deal cut between powerful, private interests that creates a profit-making monopoly over the greatest source of our culture's common knowledge." Then there's **HathiTrust**, a collaboration of research libraries whose mission is roughly the same as **OCA's**. Except that **Hathi** largely relies on **Google** scanning efforts, while the **OCA** does not, a difference which has led to occasional sparring between the groups. Then there's the idea

for a "Digital Public Library of America" spearheaded by book historian and **Harvard University** librarian **Robert Darnton**, who hopes to get everyone to work together. To date he can chalk up a steering committee and a meeting, which is more than writer and blogger **David Roth-**

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Vital Statistics

- Founded: 2008
- Number of employees: 4
- Number of books currently available: 75
- Number of books published annually: 50-60, print and digital (PDF) formats, singly or as a collection (Business Expert Press Digital Library)

History and Brief Description of Publishing Program

Business Expert Press (BEP) was started in 2007 by **David Parker**, previously Editor-in-Chief for **Global Business Publishing** with Pearson Education. **David** believed that business students at the Bachelor and MBA levels were being overlooked by other publishers and that concise, academically reliable, practical business books could be provided via libraries without complicated pricing models or leasing terms.

BEP's Digital Libraries (annual collections of 50-60 books covering topics ranging from accounting to governance to marketing to supply-chain management) are published without DRM or usage restrictions, and are purchased for a one-time fee, without any subscription or maintenance costs. Rich metadata, MARC records, and DOIs are available for every book. Other

features include automatic citations with copy/paste functions and text-to-speech capability for enhanced accessibility.

Books are available through a variety of distribution channels, such as **University Readers**, **Safari**, **XanEdu**, **Study.net**, and **Harvard Business Publishing**; and can be downloaded to the **Amazon Kindle**, **Sony Reader**, and the **Apple iPad**. Collection editors and authors are leaders in their fields from some of the top business schools in the country, such as the **University of Southern California**, **Georgetown University**, **Arizona State University**, **Georgia Institute of Technology**, the **University of Wisconsin**, **Rutgers University**, **Case Western University**, and the **University of Miami**. 🌳

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man can for his "National Digital Library" proposal, where the aim so far seems to be to serve as gadfly to the others.

Lots and lots of content there, and many millions of books already online thanks to **Google**, **OCA**, and **Hathi**. But, despite similar missions and overlapping content and principals well-known to one another, we have five different online contexts being presented. Four are wary, in differing degrees, of **Google** and of commercial underpinnings in general. One of those four plays ball with **Google** but one would call that game off. Two have roots in large universities, and while our major academic institutions are often beloved by alumni and their NCAA fan base, mega-universities in general would without much doubt, on any

rating scale of love and trust from the larger public, underachieve if compared to **Google**, the business whose commercial motives it's the business of these others to counter with their own more altruistic aims. Then the two "national digital library" initiatives, in their early arguments, have both mentioned "lobbying Washington" as a way to go, and one has referred to a "national information stimulus plan." When it comes to public love and trust, we all know where the federal government stands these days for many outspoken Americans, and can imagine the contours of that debate, should the idea get so far as to enter the mainstream of our political discourse. Altogether a deliciously complicated scene, as the contexts for all this content get worked out in the wake of the recent voiding by a federal court of the **Google Book Settlement**.

For those of us who play on smaller stages, in some ways it's not so very different. If your

organization sells eBooks that means you might work for a book vendor, a bookstore, an online bookseller, or for **Google**; or for a serials vendor, a database vendor, or a publisher; or for an aggregator, maybe commercial and maybe non-profit; or for a network or consortium. While your content may be similar your context won't be, and everyone is trying to find the right combination. Your competitor today might be your partner tomorrow. Or the reverse. Or it might be hard to tell one from another.

For librarians, the job is to figure out which combinations will work best. Which ones will stick and which will fall apart. Difficult questions and another of those things they didn't teach you in library school. It's been so long for me, though, how would I know? Maybe they do teach it today, and if they do, I should go back and take the course — most likely, online. 🌳