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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Air Show

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Last week a librarian asked me if I knew of a price index for eBooks. Journals price indexes are not only a budgeting tool of long standing, but became annual news in their own right over the course of the everlasting “serials crisis.” You can also find price indexes for print books, and we book vendors are often asked for one-off price projections. But since this librarian was asking for an index, not a forecast, I couldn’t help. If there’s anything like a price index for academic eBooks, I’ve never seen it.

I’ve offered those projections myself and have sometimes felt a little like a highwire walker in making them. What if I fall? If you know what you’re doing, though, a fall is unlikely, as **Nik Wallenda** proved on the wire to everyone this summer, right here in Niagara Falls. What a budgeting librarian really needs in a price forecast is for it to be plausible. For plausibility, there’s nothing like leaning if you can on years of data from an ongoing price index. If a forecast turns out to be accurate too, so much the better; but the truth is, no one is likely to go back later to check on that, and push you off the wire.

The way publishers, aggregators, vendors, and libraries interact with one another to agree on a price for eBooks is so specific to any number of particular situations, I’m not sure an index would ever be easy to devise or use. The eBook transaction is such a localized event, in fact, I’m not so sure there’d be a consensus price to index in the first place. When you look at buying from a publisher vs. buying from an aggregator; buying a package vs. buying a title; buying in a consortium vs. buying alone; licensing for a single user vs. licensing for any number of concurrent users; buying “in perpetuity” vs. not “buying” at all but instead subscribing, or renting, or opening a short-term loan, or paying for a fixed number of user sessions, you end up with an equation

that’s unlike anything applicable to print books. It would be as if someone asked you to create a price index for cars, and to take into account buying new and buying used, leasing, renting, taxi rides, car sharing, and whatever else is out there.

I doubt it would take long for any of us to think of academic libraries using all the above methods at once, and no time at all to think of libraries using more than one of them. If a library, say, bought one eBook at a certain price; bought another following several short-term loans whose fees were apart from the sale price; subscribed to several dozen titles in a publisher subject package for the year; bought a few dozen titles outright in another subject package; and licensed an aggregator package too, what was the average price they paid for an eBook?

Beats me. Unless we decide to make the print book transaction a lot more complicated than it’s been in the past, it looks as if eBooks and print books, which as we know sometimes are as alike as twins but sometimes are more like first cousins, here are starting to resemble more distant relations, part monograph, part serial, part database, and even part inter-library loan. The ways we’ve become used to thinking about book prices no longer work in the world we’re all moving into.

In fact, the ways we’ve become used to looking at a lot of things don’t seem to fit so well any longer. Libraries have time-tested ways to buy print books, but what not long ago seemed routine — firm orders, approval plans — now can seem reckless, like gambling. *This* book will leap off the shelf, will beat the odds. Won’t it? Each one is ordered and received in that hope, anyway, as card and slot players know there’s hope for them to beat the house in a casino. For library selectors, while at least it’s not their own money, comfort levels were considerably higher before their odds were published so regularly.

Today bets are often hedged with “pilots,” programs to test out a new way of doing things, or in my dictionary’s definition, “serving as a tentative model for future experiment or development.” That “tentative” for more “experiment” part is a pretty good description of where we are. Libraries, vendors, aggregators, publishers — we all know eBooks will keep growing, we’re just not sure exactly how. We try this, and we try that. So many pilot programs have been launched we need an air traffic control tower.

Without one, we’re in danger. Not the danger you might think, though, that without air traffic controllers our pilots will collide and fall to earth. We have a different problem. We’re at risk that our pilot programs will not collide, that instead they’ll buzz about in the sky indefinitely, flying loops around one another, each on their own course, a thousand non-intersecting flight plans leaving majestic vapor trails that soar toward the sun. And then vanish.

We need some collisions. We need signals from air traffic control directing us toward contact. That means that publishers, aggregators, vendors, and libraries can’t fly past each other. We need pilots aiming for destinations beyond conference presentations or someone’s goals and objectives for the year. If this aggregator and that library run a pilot, or if that consortia and this publisher have one, or if this vendor and that aggregator work out a flight plan, we are all going to stay up in the sky.

This isn’t to knock pilot programs. Pilots are good, we learn from them. It is to say, though, that they aren’t an end in themselves. Publishers, libraries, aggregators, and vendors each have their own realities, realities not altogether unknown to the others, but too often unacknowledged. Publishers have concerns over piracy, and librarians want the best possible user experience for their patrons. Libraries want aggregated workflows with vendors, and publishers want direct sales channels. Everyone wants eBooks to grow, and many library users still want print. Aggregators and vendors want attractive pricing models for libraries, and publishers want to protect their revenue.

We can all wish things were easier, but a good first step might be to agree that it’s not easy, that all of these issues are real, real to someone who matters, and that if we all want altitude, we need to acknowledge this in going about our business. The **Wright Brothers** invented an airplane, but they didn’t invent aviation. Until we invent ours, what we have is more than a highwire act, but it’s still an air show. 🦋

The National Media Market ... from page 82

— discuss current media issues, best practices, guidelines and copyright concerns. All of the professional development sessions offered at the **NMM** focus on technologies, collections, and issues specific to media professionals.

This year, the **NMM** coincides with the Consortium of College and University Media Centers (CCUMC) conference, also being held in Las Vegas (<http://ccumc.unlv.edu/conference/>). Ever vigilant in providing opportunity to connect with other media professionals, the **NMM** and CCUMC are partnering up for a couple of days and offering access to key workshops like “Copyright and Fair Use: Matching

Policy with Mission” led by **Pat Aufderheide** and **Brandon Butler**. I am looking forward to attending this CCUMC workshop along with a host of **NMM** break out sessions including **Allen Chou’s** talk on Social Media. I plan to leave Las Vegas with a lot of films, new insights on copyright and fair use, and some fresh ideas on how to run a successful social media campaign. So, in this case, what happens in Vegas won’t be staying in Vegas. Well, perhaps some of it will... 🦋

Endnotes

1. *Against the Grain*, v.20#4 September 2008, **Philip Hallman’s** column “**Media Minder**.”