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The Scholarly Publishing Scene: STM Books, Better in Print than Ever

Myer Kutz

Myer Kutz Associates, Inc., myerkutz@aol.com

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The Scholarly Publishing Scene — STM Books, Better in Print than Ever

Column Editor: **Myer Kutz** (President, Myer Kutz Associates, Inc.)

<myerkutz@aol.com>

The last royalty statement from one of my publishers (I edit engineering handbooks for three major publishers — **Wiley**, **McGraw-Hill**, and **Elsevier**) was something of an eye-opener, although I should have been prepared for it. Royalties for my three titles, published in 2005, 2009, and 2011, were up overall, but welcome as that news was, it wasn't the big news. What caught my attention was that for the first time, royalties from electronic sales had surged ahead of print royalties. I allowed myself to contemplate the notion that strength in electronic sales hinted at a robust life for the current editions of these books, right up to the moment, I hoped, that the publisher issued new editions.

You might throw up your hands and shout that I shouldn't have been surprised in the slightest. Let's face it; we all know which way this thing is going. Or we think we know. Or, as some among us would have it, we ought to know by now. I'm talking about the migration from print to electronic of reference and scholarly books, as well as some textbooks. Or has this thing advanced enough so that I should say the *replacement* of print books by all manner of electronic books? I might as well. The evidence is all around me.

It's been years since the powers-that-be at the big engineering school not far from where I live cleared out the bookcases, which used to hold numerous big-time technical reference works, as well as journals, if memory serves, from the main reading room and put in tables and a few banks of computer terminals. It wouldn't surprise me if that library's acquisition budget was 80/20 electronic versus print, or maybe the ratio is even more pronounced. I got the 80/20 figure recently from a librarian at a major state university, where some vestiges of a humanities curriculum that might still be somewhat print oriented may be hanging on in an era when politicians and university boards of trustees seem bent on making universities into trade schools. As for students, their demands are for having textbooks delivered to their smart phones. So I'm told — and I have no inclination to doubt the messengers of such tidings, even if I have to acknowledge that they are making prophets of those

CEOs who kept repeating the tired bromide that their organization's mission was to provide customers what they wanted wherever and whenever they wanted it. Dreams, even those out of the mouths of CEOs, can come true once the enabling technology becomes available.

Then there are STM journals. Once STM publishers were able to run their subscription businesses as well in the electronic realm as they always had in the print world, the rest of the story was inevitable. Nowadays, if someone hands you a paper copy of an issue of an STM journal, chances are it's an examination copy, which the publisher might be using for publicity purposes at a scientific conference. Publishing journals electronically makes everything about them easier to do. Now that journals are electronic they're just better than they used to be a generation ago, especially for readers, who have searchable archives at their fingertips, among other new delights. The benefits are spreading to the wider world of periodicals, as general interest magazines hasten to stay viable. The current issue of *The New Yorker* arrived with a wraparound providing me with an activation number so I can access the magazine's digital offerings.

On the other hand, when it comes to trade books, many readers of fiction and non-fiction must still prefer print. Some people even think that there are books that work better in print than electronically. For example, **David Carr** devoted one of his *New York Times* columns to a successful print book, *Cool Tools*, that, according to **Carr**, "has a thrown-together appeal that invites browsing of another sort." Everyone can easily see that **Amazon** recognizes the preference: **Amazon** may tout its Kindle line, but as a service to customers it lists used copies from non-**Amazon** sellers alongside new copies and Kindle versions for each title, no matter how recently published. I'm one of those old-school customers. When it comes to fiction, I still prefer print, and I'm not above buying used copies. (One of my favorite haunts is a tastefully stocked used bookstore — no **James Patterson** there! — about twenty-minutes drive from my home.) I'd much rather read a slightly worn trade paperback than scroll through a version of that book on my Kindle. Fact is, I haven't even charged the machine for months.

As for those reference and scholarly STM books that increasingly are going electronic, there's this curious thing: the publishers are still making print versions available, and in many cases, it seems to me, the books look and feel better than these kinds of books used to. I say this after perusing dozens of titles at the **PROSE Awards** judging this January. I also have to say that art books and clinical medicine textbooks are as lavishly produced as they ever have been. But the college textbooks I reviewed as a judge — in chemistry, physics, mathematics, and environmental and earth sciences — may have even more colorful features than such textbooks in these disciplines used to have, perhaps because publishers have surmised that today's undergraduates, even

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Column Editor: **David Parker** (Publisher, Business Products, Alexander Street Press; Phone: 201-673-8784) <dparker@astreetpress.com> Follow me on Twitter @theblurringline

If you read my November column in *Against the Grain* you know that I believe demand-driven acquisition and metered-usage models will grow in both degree and importance for university library collection development strategy and in terms of providing a fertile pathway for new business models. In “The Blurring Line” I am especially interested in emerging business models and the people and companies behind these efforts to innovate. In this column I will explore demand-drive models in the delivery of journal articles. It has always struck me that the book publishing world can learn much from the journal publishing world in terms of open access and the journal publishing world can learn much from the book publishing world in terms of demand-driven access. Of course much book and journal publishing goes on under the same roof, but frequently the respective publishers struggle with incorporating the advances from the world of their counterparts.

In journal publishing all too often the discussion around new business models is confined to explorations of open access versus the traditional publishing model. Open access is a critically important topic, especially for scholars seeking the broadest dissemination of their ideas and the broadest access to research. But open access will inevitably be constrained by its funding models and/or business models,

whether they be state/university-driven or publishing company-driven. I suspect I will be writing a future column on new publisher business models to fund open-access in journal publishing, but that is for another day.

The same pressures that are pushing open access forward are behind the growth of demand-driven models. Declining state and university budgets coupled with better data analytics and data sources combine to simultaneously force and empower librarians to look harder at the big deal and broad-based subscriptions. I believe that the big deal will slowly but inevitably unwind as a primary business model for acquiring journals and most second- and third-tier journals will face increasing pressure to experiment with demand-driven models. Of course, top-tier and very high-usage journals will be somewhat insulated from these pressures, but the drive to maximize revenue generation will compel the savviest publishers to strike the right balance between a variety of business models to meet the most possible customer segments. And librarians and scholars will use a mix of content acquisition methods to get the needed research in scholars’ hands as fast as possible, so we are sure to see a healthy mix of open access, subscriptions, ILL, rentals, and peer-to-peer sharing.

In the remainder of this column I want to stay true to the mission of The Blurring Line and look at some

examples of where demand-driven is heading in the journal world with a specific focus on aggregation players in the space.

The forerunner to demand-driven models in journal article access was the token system introduced by publishers such as **Wiley**, **Nature Publishing Group**, and **Future Science**. This is a very straightforward model dating back to the late 1990s. The publisher offers a package of tokens for a fixed fee, and the library and its patrons draw down on a fixed account of tokens as they access individual articles and at their leisure with no period or term of usage. Depending on the degree of control the library is seeking over token usage, regimes can be put in place. For example, **Wiley’s** token system offers a “Super User” through whom requests must pass before a token is dispensed and an article is accessed. The token system looks and functions like PDA, but was the construct of individual publishers seeking a controlled and tightly monitored system to dispense single articles for unsubscribed journals. The token system, however, suffers from a lack of scale in that it is confined to single publishers. The recent introduction of aggregation schemes for demand-driven access to journal articles offers new and interesting opportunities. Here I will focus on three stand-out examples: Deep Dyve, Get it Now, and ReadCube.

DeepDyve is a professionally-oriented service that has aggregated nearly 10 million articles across thousands of peer-reviewed journals sourced from 100+ scholarly publishers. DeepDyve is focused on selling memberships to individuals and organizations in the professional/corporate space. This is not a PDA model, but rather a rental model predicated on access for a term of use/access to an individual article. The DeepDyve story is compelling as it represented the first aggregation scheme oriented toward delivering affordable, real-time access to journal articles with an emphasis on marketing to professionals and researchers outside of the university. And DeepDyve’s membership model opened up new spaces for thinking about how content could be monetized, not only in terms of distribution channels, but also in terms of revenue generation models.

The **Copyright Clearance Center’s** (CCC) service, Get It Now, provides a similar service to that of DeepDyve, but aimed at the scholarly researcher in the university library. If the library selects an unmediated service, access to articles is provided via an open URL search and the library is billed on a monthly or bi-monthly basis and articles can be shared across users if the library has an annual copyright license from CCC. A medi-

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graduate students, have low attention spans as a result of heavy Internet usage. This is just an impression. I haven’t done any side-by-side comparison between textbooks of different eras. Otherwise, with regard to physical quality of the scientific reference and scholarly books I reviewed in the **PROSE Awards** judging, I saw no evidence that corners were being cut. I had the impression that color was being used more freely than in the past. Some trim sizes struck me as extravagant. Expense wasn’t spared on paper and cover stocks. (Heavy glossy paper stock is needed to support color, of course.) Many books were as heavy a lift physically as they were intellectually.

This situation strikes me as remarkable, not only in light of the replacement of print by electronic, but also in the face of declining unit sales for the kinds of books I’m talking about

here. So what’s going on? Well, it must be cheaper to print and bind these books that it used to be, no matter how much color is used, or the weights of paper and covers. Short print runs can’t be as much of a problem as they once were. Because the major STM publishers are global, I suppose that they can easily get print books produced wherever it’s cheapest to do so without sacrificing quality in any respect.

These points were reinforced for me during the **PROSE** judging when I looked at a table laden with massive piles of multi-volume reference works. And here’s where my thinking took a turn. I love physical books, but these piles looked wasteful. So here’s one question I had, among others: are there still overseas markets for these behemoths, even though searchable electronic versions are far more useful? Answers to such questions are beyond my pay grade these days. But I do wonder whether such questions are keeping any publishers up these cold winter nights. 🐼