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Leila Salisbury
University Press of Mississippi, lsalisbury@ihl.state.ms.us

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From A University Press — Opening Pandora's (Cable) Box

Column Editor: **Leila W. Salisbury** (Director, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, MS 39211; Phone: 601-432-6205) <lsalisbury@ihl.state.ms.us>

The **2014 Charleston Conference** had me thinking a great deal about PDA/DDA, STL, and now EBA (evidence-based acquisition) programs. Our vendors give us statistics that show purchases moving rapidly away from approval or even single-title purchasing in favor of these above models. The subsequent revenue from these sales certainly shows in publishers' bottom line, especially as STL purchases result in a fraction of the revenue. Interestingly, as there was much gnashing of teeth about costs, revenue, shrinking budgets, and the like at the conference, I actually came away with the distinct impression that usage was *UP.* That comes as welcome news to university presses, who have often been accused of publishing overly specialized books that few want to read or use.

And yet, in this increasingly pay-per-view world, will libraries actually end up paying *more* in the quest to save money and purchase selectively?

On the flight back from Charleston, I was reading an issue of *Entertainment Weekly* (yes, for work! It's surprisingly helpful to me as an acquiring editor in film and media studies who dropped cable years ago). On the heels of HBO and CBS's separate announcements of services that would allow viewers to stream recent shows without a cable subscription, journalist **James Hibbard** wrote an insightful meditation on what this may mean for the industry more widely. In the wonderfully titled "What Streams May Come," **Hibberd** notes, "*Viva la revolución,* right? Not necessarily. As much as we all love to grouse about cable bills, breaking up the current system could have all sorts of butterfly-effect consequences that might be even worse. Because do you really want to pay $72 a year to watch *2 Broke Girls*?"

Hibberd suggests that cracking open the cable box will possibly spur several unwelcome things. In current cable packages, viewers are essentially paying for a handful of the most popular networks and getting a great deal of other content for very little money. Studies suggest that paying for single networks will likely actually mean viewers would have a higher end cost (in Canada and other countries, such models leave viewers "paying more for less," according to **Hibberd**). Second, the current infrastructure of in-ground cable simply can't support such a high volume of individual streaming. Bandwidth caps are becoming a more common response to the crush of traffic on the Internet highway, and this would eventually limit individual streaming. In the article, analyst **Fernando Elizalde** estimates that "billions in upgrades" would be needed to support such mass streaming. "Who's going to pay for that?" he asks.

Finally, in a world where every show is not *Game of Thrones,* what happens to the programming produced by smaller or educational channels? **Elizalde** hints at a dark, perhaps Darwinian, downside for programming in an à la carte purchase model: "smaller channels could wither and even die."

It was this last observation that made me realize that we could easily be talking about books here. There is a pretty close scholarly publishing equivalent (particularly in the humanities) to each of **Hibberd's** and **Elizalde's** observations about cable and individually streamed shows. Cable may be somewhat akin to the packages and similar programs offered by publishers. Approval plans, which offered at least predictable spending and revenue, might be the monographic equivalent of a cable subscription. Dismantling this buying pattern will likely mean that publishers will charge more for both their most appealing publications as well as the lesser used ones, as each offering is expected to carry more of its own financial weight, especially with a not-for-profit publisher.

The question of infrastructure is also a salient one. There may be rafts of free content out there for streaming and viewing and downloading, but the physical cables on which this content travels are not unlimited or free. Nor is the infrastructure (either the people or the technical platforms) that develops, publishes, hosts, and disseminates scholarship. Libraries and university presses know this equally well and manage to do hero's work on a shoestring nearly every day, but there are limits. Salaries must be paid, content must be licensed, and there must be revenue or budget allocations to support the mission-oriented work we do on behalf of our home institutions and scholars and students worldwide. In the end, to echo **Elizalde**, who pays for that?

While work to improve the discoverability of university press and library content is improving and librarians and publishers are focusing hard on how to further enhance the discovery and use of our materials, those efforts alone will not save specialized content. **Elizalde's** specter of disappearing shows and channels could — and in some ways already has — happened to books. With all efforts and attention focused on the blockbusters, there is little room for experimentation and for the time and resources necessary to cultivate new fields of scholarship and inquiry. Production costs cannot be deferred, even for books — or shows — that may take years or even decades to find their audience and revenue. By the time it became a wildly popular cult hit, the show *Arrested Development* had long been cancelled. Yes, it was so popular it was eventually brought back in a limited way by a streaming service rather than a network, but it just couldn't recapture the original magic and momentum. Though I wish there were those after-the-fact advocates among scholars, I would posit that the avalanches of fan mail and kickstarter campaigns would not easily translate to scholarly publishing. There will simply be books that would go undeveloped and unpublished.

I'm certainly not the first to argue that we, publishers and librarians, are part of a very delicate ecosystem. The shifting of costs, funding, and purchase models affects us all. But we need to understand that while breaking open Pandora's Box may be a necessary thing, we should be aware of its consequences.

Short-term lending and EBA programs will probably not decrease overall content costs in perpetuity, and libraries may in the end get less content for those same flat acquisitions dollars (that we all feel lucky if we even have). Ultimately, someone will pay for infrastructure. If we're not careful, it may be the for-profit publishers. In his October 29, 2014 article "The Size of the Open Access Market," **Joe Esposito** argues that while OA has gained traction as part of our scholarly world, it's also rapidly being appropriated by the for-profits. The structure that was supposed to set content free is now becoming its own business, and users will in the end pay for it, perhaps dearly, through one channel or another.

So as we make decisions about how we develop and provide access to content, let's keep in mind those other entities that are sharing our stream of knowledge, the users who want more and not less, and the libraries and presses that have nurtured and preserved scholarship over the decades. Natural selection has its advantages, but if the utility and use of what we do as libraries and publishers is real and meaningful, let's figure out how to keep the key members of our ecosystem alive.