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The Scholarly Publishing Scene--Necessary Balancing Acts

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The Scholarly Publishing Scene — Necessary Balancing Acts

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Early this fall a senior editor at one of the houses that publishes engineering handbooks of mine wrote to tell me that he wouldn't have as much time to deal with me as previously because the company where he works was going through a reorganization and a "great many people" would be laid-off in a month or so. The news took me aback and I responded with concern about him and his colleagues. But not about myself. That I saved for another time.

Nevertheless, I have more to say, but my purpose in this column is not to analyze that particular decision. I'm in no position to do so thoroughly and fairly, for the simple reason that I'm not privy to any of the factors that went into the decision and I'm not about to attempt to interview company executives and members of its board, none of who would talk to me anyway, I'd guess. I'm just the editor of some handbooks the company publishes, after all, even though one of them is a bestseller for its type of publication. So why would anyone in power think they needed to share management information with me? I'd expect an expression of some concern about the welfare of my handbooks, albeit carefully hedged (they might be planning to eventually divest the lists containing my handbooks and wouldn't want to give that information away), but nothing more than that.

The news brought to mind an encounter when I'd been appointed general manager of the scientific and technical division at Wiley thirty years ago. There were over a hundred and thirty people working for me, which was one way of putting it. One of the senior production managers congratulated me and then said, "we're counting on you." As she saw it, I surmised, all those people weren't only working for me, they were also in some measure depending on me. So I'm sure that I said something that was meant to be reassuring. But that wasn't the whole story, of course. It never is.

A few years before that encounter, I'd been present at a discussion between my predecessor and his second-in-command. It was just after a board meeting. I listened to the two of them agreeing with satisfaction that the most important job of a corporate executive was to increase shareholder value.

While I would agree that increasing a for-profit company's stock price over a sustained period (not for a quarter or two) is the prime measure of how well a chief executive and his or her reports and other executives perform, there are, it seems to me, constituencies other than shareholders to whom attention ought to be paid.

Take the example of a publishing company and the concern expressed by that production manager three decades ago. Was it my prime responsibility to maintain the production department as it was in terms of the number of jobs within the department and not to make working conditions for the staff any harsher than they were? Or was it my responsibility to embrace new technology when it made sense and to look to outsource production functions both internally and externally, no matter how many departmental jobs were lost? Do you run roughshod over a staff and institute a reign of terror to force them to work harder?

Look at the issue in another, more personal, way: I remember my financial manager, who was well versed on staff reduction issues, telling me that other executives whom she and others in similar positions had worked for had attempted to placate their bosses and save their own jobs by letting people go — and that while the bosses accepted the layoffs, the strategy didn't help an executive save his own job.

In the final analysis, I knew that no matter what cost control strategy I adopted, I had to maintain quality and enough of a personal touch among editorial and production staff to keep book authors and journal editors satisfied. You wouldn't want them decamping for a smaller publisher, say, who promised to be more nurturing. Nor could you consider them nothing more than prima donnas whom you could treat dismissively because of the reputation your company had for publishing works of great scientific and technological value over a considerable period of time.

Not that that reputation wasn't extremely important. We executives considered ourselves stewards of the company's intellectual property and reputation for publishing excellence. It was our job to maintain the logo's significance and relevance. And what the company published was greater than any one of us. Or all of us, for that matter.

Which brings me to another important constituency — the public with its perception of your company and other publishing companies. The public I speak of includes many in academia and in government and funding agencies who believe it borders on the immoral to profit from journal articles reporting on publically funded research, as well as many in the broader public who subscribe to the bromide that "information wants to be free." So when, as has happened in the case of STM publishing, that the public determines that your company is in journal publishing only for the money — only for the enrichment of shareholders and corporate fat cats — there's



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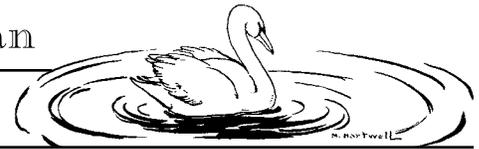
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Notes from Mosier — The Silver Swan



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The English Renaissance composer **Orlando Gibbons** (1583-1625) published perhaps his most famous work, a madrigal, titled *The Silver Swan* in 1612. During that time a popular conceit held that swans, nearing death, were granted the gift of speech. The lyrics to the madrigal have been ascribed to **Gibbons**, to his associate **Sir Christopher Hatton**, and are by some regarded as anonymous. The madrigal, in five voices, is an achingly beautiful choral work, and during my time in Oxford May Day was always a treat, when the choir of **Magdalen** singing madrigals from the college tower at dawn.

The lyrics are as follows:

*The Silver Swan, who living, had no note,
When Death approached, unlocked her silent throat,
Leaning her head upon the reedy shore,
Thus sang her first and last, and sang no more:
"Farewell all joys! O Death come close mine eyes,
More geese than swans now live, more fools than wise."*

This is but one of many examples of an older generation proclaiming their grief and sorrow over the perceived shortcomings of their younger counterparts. Alas it is that I find myself increasingly identifying with the *Old Codgers Club* and viewing the behavior of younger librarians with dismay.

I'll confine this rant to a few topics, in the belief that not many of you will read much further anyway. But here are a few bones I will pick (or dead horses I'll kick, or what you will):

Amazon. I've already spoken out about what I view as the obscene practices of **Amazon**. During my bookselling career, when I was still (at least somewhat) restrained, I bit my tongue when librarians would tell me in one breath that they "wouldn't dream of shopping at Wal-Mart" but would then proclaim they did much of their book acquisitions through **Amazon**, **Wal-Mart's** digital equivalent. The arguments that faculty and students expect delivery in a couple of days doesn't hold water with me. It's time we stop this capitulation to immediate gratification and tell faculty, "Look, if you really needed that for your course reserves you needed to ask for it last month." Ordering from a predatory, abusive organization is not acceptable. Convenience does

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a crisis. Leading academics have taken up arms, so to speak, and have established their own publishing entities, with journals, for example, that publish top-drawer papers that news organizations run to for the latest relevant scientific and medical information. Governments and funding agencies take steps that threaten the health of your lucrative business model.

The STM publishing industry and individual houses have taken steps to deal with these threats — calling for shutting down Internet privacy sites, for example — and to bolster their image as stewards of STM knowledge and information. Readers of this magazine are doubtlessly familiar with most or all of the new journal publishing business models, as well as the industry givebacks and concessions made to the STM academic and professional communities.

Say what you will about whether the industry and its eight-hundred-pound gorillas have been dragged kicking and screaming into this state of affairs. Suffice it to say that shareholders' pockets can no longer be the sole concern of STM publishing executives. Not if they want to survive — and want their companies to prosper. Their primary concern can no longer focus solely on profits that will translate into shareholder value. Publishing executives also have to perform the necessary balancing acts I've been alluding to. So long as revenues and profits don't head south, of course, and desperate measures are required. 🌿

not justify exploitation. You are supporting an organization that does not pay a living wage or benefits, and bullies its suppliers. This does not represent the core values we express as librarians, and to cave to this pressure is inexcusable. I feel that in becoming a librarian I have joined a tribe of hypocrites.

PDA/DDA — I have written already that on one level we have always been patron-driven: if a patron wants something, we do our best to get it. I will grant that adding a PDA/DDA option to your library's suite of services can be beneficial to users. But those who in recent years have advocated abdicating all collection development responsibility to this model do so at the severe detriment of at least a certain percentage of their patron base. I have heard AULs from **ARL** libraries expound such views. What utter gibberish. Those in an academic community who cotton on to what this can deliver will exploit it to their advantage; those who don't will suffer. As a collection development officer your duty is to maintain some form of balance; to relinquish *all* decision-making is to build an unbalanced, out of sync collection and serve your patron base poorly.

Social media / social skills — like PDA/DDA, social media focus has gotten totally out of control. These are tools; like any tools, they can be used wisely or inappropriately. If you spend more than an hour a day on Facebook there's likely something seriously wrong with your values. Yes, we need to engage users and patrons utilizing the media they use and are comfortable with, but not to the point of compromising our core values.

Also, those of you in acquisitions, collection development, and technical services need to take a crash course in etiquette. For example: it is not acceptable or appropriate to ignore telephone calls or emails from vendors seeking to schedule appointments. As a young bookseller (in those pre-email, pre-web days) I scheduled meetings and enjoyed the professional courtesy and easy social grace of a generation of librarians now largely retired. Later, when I was a library director, I faithfully replied to all such calls, often explaining that our budget or collection requirements didn't fit with the vendor's offerings — but I had the decency and fundamental politeness to respond. To disregard such requests is irresponsible, unprofessional, and ultimately expensive to your institutions, because vendors must schedule itineraries and build business models around workable scenarios. If you are charged with spending public money — perhaps in the millions — you need to behave in a way that stands up to public scrutiny.

Conversely, vendors need to understand the world of libraries. I got telephone calls in my library director days from companies who had products and packages whose cost exceeded my total materials budget. I politely explained we couldn't afford their offering, asked to be taken off their call list, and in some cases, e.g., children's materials, pointed out we didn't have very many kids in our district. One of the primary reasons we established the **Feather River Institute**, which has subsequently transitioned into the **Acquisitions Institute at Timberline Lodge**, was to create a forum to enable librarians, publishers, serials agents, booksellers, and library automation vendors better to understand the business realities and challenges each group faces.

So we're back to the Swans. I had younger colleagues at **Blackwell's** who were ambitious, in some cases able, and driven, but had no interest in paying their dues. Some have gone on to library careers with lofty titles but questionable responsibilities that might seem unwarranted given the perilous state of library funding (what, indeed, do some of these positions [I'll refrain from identifying job titles] truly have to do with our mission? Yes, these functions need to be addressed, but it would seem we do so at a disproportionate level.). Once again we confront the beast of instant gratification. To them I would simply say: follow this path at your peril: you too will be at this watershed, not all that far distant, where the high water mark can be seen and you will look back on your successors with a mixture of who knows what?

"An individual is rich in the things he can do without." — **Henry David Thoreau** 🌿