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The Scholarly Publishing Scene--Brave New World?

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I had my first book published in the late nineteen sixties. It was an engineering monograph, titled *Temperature Control.* It was based in part on work I was doing on the **Apollo** project at the **MIT** Instrumentation Lab. I did the literature research I needed in the **MIT** engineering library, which was under the dome above the building with the columns that you see when you look at the original campus from the banks of the Charles River. That building, with the dome, is cast on the sides of my **MIT** class ring. The main library is in a separate, more modern building further to the east on the campus.

I confess that I hadn't used the engineering library during my student years. By the time I did, half a dozen years after graduating in 1959, I discovered that I didn't need three-by-five index cards or a yellow pad to hand write notes from the publications I was consulting. There were photocopying machines that I could avail myself of. So I could copy pages that contained what I needed, which shortened my research time markedly. I was what I might call a copyright naif at the time and I gave no thought to whether or not I might be treading on the wrong side of any intellectual property boundaries.

Nearly two decades later, in the mid-nineteen eighties, after having written a total of seven fiction and general non-fiction books that were published by trade houses, I published the first of fifteen or so contributed works that I have (for the most part) dreamed up and then solely put together for such commercial scientific and technical houses as **Wiley**, **McGraw-Hill** and **Elsevier**.

When I think back to those early days in the part of my career devoted to writing and editing engineering books, it strikes me that that time was much more innocent and transparent than the time in which we've been living since the Internet permeated our lives. Let me explain.

First of all, you could, it seems to me, easily check up on your publisher's sales efforts, or lack of them, on behalf of your books. There were brick and mortar stores which you could visit to see if your books were on the shelves. Some cities had technical bookstores. Large general bookstores had sections with technical books. I actually visited stores whenever I happened to be in a city away from home to see whether they had any of my engineering books for sale. I also checked out catalogues and shelves in

engineering libraries whenever I happened to be on a campus.

In addition, there were direct mail brochures and catalogs of both new and backlist books that I could ask for to see whether my books were prominently featured, or even included at all. Because I'm a long-time member of the **American Society of Mechanical Engineers**, my name was on potential customer lists that publishers could purchase and use, so mailings would arrive at my home. Of course, budgetary cutbacks, in the midst of fiscal years when sales and margins weren't meeting expectations, could put a kibosh on direct mail programs. And accounting disciplinarians would criticize direct mail programs for any tiny bad debt percentage to get senior management to clamp down on them. Still, the programs existed, even if they were dormant from time to time, until new management took over or until a fiscal cloud lifted.

In any case, publishers' current marketing tactics seem to me much less robust than they were twenty or more years ago. When I asked one of my editors, who's in a senior position, about marketing for my books, his reply was: "any marketing is usually done just before and upon publication as you know and I don't have records of what was specifically done for your handbooks."

Nowadays, if I want to check on where my books are for sale, I have to go either to **Amazon** (somehow looking at your books on your **Amazon** page isn't quite the same as finding them on the shelves of brick and mortar stores used to be), to publishers' own Websites or to the sites of aggregators who I hope have made deals with my publishers. (**Elsevier**, of course, owns the books aggregator **Knovel**, with which **Wiley** and **McGraw-Hill** won't do business any more. They've transferred that business to **Information Handling Services (IHS)**.) Because I don't work at a university or other organization that subscribes to services provided by aggregators, such as **IHS** or **Skillsoft**, I'm handicapped in quickly discovering whether any particular book of mine is available for searching. I don't always know the right people to call, and the people a general operator puts me in touch with often haven't a clue about the substance of my questions.

There's another thing: I decide what goes into my books. But I'm not consulted on how

an electronic service handles my books and presents the contents to its customers.

In the print-on-paper days of yore, royalties on sales from my books were based entirely on straightforward calculations. To be sure, different sales channels (domestic, foreign, direct mail, etc.) had different discounts from the list price and royalty rates, which might increase if overall unit sales exceeded a certain threshold, but all you had to do to get a royalty amount was multiply the number of copies sold through any channel by the appropriate discount and royalty rate. There could be a hitch: while consulting for a client, I discovered that their publisher sold copies to foreign subsidiaries at unexpectedly severe discounts from the list price and at a lower royalty rate, to boot.

Of course, publishers don't sell anywhere near as many physical copies of engineering books as they used to. For contributed books, "it's twenty cents on the dollar," one senior editor told me. What physical copies publishers do sell don't go through brick and mortar stores, but through the **Amazons** of this world. A lot of the money that does manage to arrive in publishers' accounts comes from electronic sales, sometimes of entire books, sometimes not.

And whereas royalties for print sales still follow the traditional straightforward computation, the royalty calculation for electronic sales is opaque to me. Some of my royalty money comes from hits or "snippets" (that charming word). I do know that a substantial number of hits doesn't translate into substantial royalty dollars — my publishers aren't cheating me, that's just the way life is in our Brave New World. And now, through no fault of the publishers, people can view snippets without my getting paid at all.

There are other ways in which usage of material from my handbooks brings me no joy. Let me return to the copyright issue I alluded to earlier in this column. Years later, I chaired the **Association of American Publishers'** copyright committee and became an intellectual property zealot. But I don't have to be one when I find chapters from my handbooks on sites where there is no connection to a publisher, and thus no royalty flow. In one particularly annoying instance, I wrote an angry letter to the two grinning persons who openly ran the site. I dispensed with asking them if they were information-wants-to-be-free imbeciles and bluntly accused them of theft. I glanced at their clueless response and then notified my publisher of their site's existence. I knew that whatever difficulties and disappointments I might have dealing with publishers, they do go after thieves. 🐾