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Blurring Lines—When all the Lines Blur … the Patron, Publisher and Librarian All Win

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during the 2016 Charleston Conference, Rick Anderson and I
presented on a hypothetical future in which a demand driven plat-
form would emerge where publishers and patrons would meet,
“eBay-style” to virtually negotiate terms of access (triggers, length of
term of access and price) and in a multimedia environment. Why access
eBooks and video, for example, across different DDA platforms from
the same provider? Taking this line of thinking to its logical conclusion,
one might posit a universal, multimedia platform for all content types
from all publishers wherein real-time data about usage and price paid
inform what the publisher proposes as a fee and what the library/patron
are willing to pay in response. Of course, this is a vast hypothetical and
Rick was charged with presenting three factors impeding this future
state and I presented three factor impelling us toward this future state.

I find myself frequently returning to this thought experiment as we
at Alexander Street have been involved in a grand transition from deliv-
ering our streaming video via subject and publisher-based collections
to delivering our video content via multi-disciplinary aggregation with
a parallel DDA offering; all while integrating our products and services
into the larger ProQuest suite of solutions. Where might the
“thought experiment” take us when journal articles, musical
scores, video, eBooks, archival documents, musical tracks,
newspapers, datasets, and photo images are all extant, in
one home, with powerful platform technology at hand?

As information suppliers, we are constantly
operating in three distinct but intertwined activities: securing and delivering content,
providing a powerful platform solution and
developing services that enrich the experience of content and platform. And, I
often argue, we are navigating these three intertwined activities during an evolution in
our operating environment that is defined by
three irreversible trends. Though they are
advancing in fits and starts, the trajectory is
clearly forward, they are open access, demand driven acquisition, and
data informed decision making. There is, however, a fourth new and
emerging trend that while nascent nonetheless sure to be as significant
as the other three in the coming decade: that is the delivery of learning
content, writ large, through the library and its technical infrastructure,
either in partnership or in competition with the large learning companies
(e.g., Pearson and McGraw Hill) and open educational resource (OER)
providers — like OpenStax. This is a hotly contested perspective, but
I maintain it is a significant and inevitable trend for two key reasons.

First, the business model whereby learning content is monetized on a
per-student basis at very high per student costs is under ever-growing
assault. And, second, the growth of alternative learning content (for fee
and OER) on the open web needs the curation and indexing of a typical
library database to be widely discovered and accessed.

Pulling this all together — a broader thought experiment, if you
will — requires of us an embracing of key assumptions about the future,
whether we be leaders charting the course of the future of information
service companies or administrators directing the university library:

1. Open Access must become a broad concept — Open will mean
open access research, open educational resources, with quality
indexing and integration within platforms of open sources of
information from multimedia providers not specifically and
directly monetizing their content via access charges. This is
all the best content, for free and for fee, discoverable on one
platform with equal quality indexing and metadata.

2. The digital space that is the library must serve the whole
faculty member and the whole student — I spent the first nine
years of my career with Cengage and Pearson (Learning) and

3. Demand driven acquisition must get smarter — Much has
been written about the damage demand driven acquisition
has done to smaller university presses. And I have seen
firsthand the struggles of niche educational video providers
relying upon multiple views of their content to achieve a
monetized use. The logic seems to go that
only publishers with high use content or very
large and deep backlists can survive DDA.
But this is thinking too narrowly. Publishers
and library administration simply need to
engage in a meaningful dialogue around
the cost of access, and an evolved platform is
the mechanism to achieve this outcome.
The conversation cannot be forced, but it
can be facilitated in “electronic barter.”
At present, the terms of access are nar-
row, the conversation between publisher
and patron is opaque, and the returns
are lopsided. Our technology is smart
e Enough to overcome these obstacles, and
publishers and information providers and
librarians responsible for budgets and purchasing are smart
e enough to understand that different use cases for different
types of content merit different access terms and pricing.

4. Platforms must become multi-media, truly multi-media and
the total number of platforms must continually decline —
Although the American Psychological Association has not
formally recognized “Platform Weariness” as a condition, I
know many librarians who are certain they are suffering from
this malady. At ER&L this past spring, the growth of evidence
based acquisition offerings that are publisher-direct was signif-
icient. In most cases, the publisher platform for evidence-based
access already existed, so this was simply the extension of a
new business model, but why? Why not deliver EBA through
an existing multi-publisher platform? As a former director of
a small, specialty publishing company I was engaged in no
fewer than 20 distinct distribution partnerships that each came
with a platform. And, each relationship/platform entailed
different decisions about access, pricing, etc., but none were
truly multi-media and very broadly multi-publisher (except
Amazon ...). I imagine a future state with a handful of very,
very smart platforms that publishers, patrons and the inform-
ation provider/platform provider are cooperating, achieving
stated critical goals and measures and exceptional outcomes
are had by patrons and platform weariness is no more.

Here is to the future! 🤔

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