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Adventures in Librarianship: Desperate Ax

by **Ned Kraft** (Order Librarian, Ralph J. Bunche Library, U.S. Department of State) (kraftno@state.gov)

I received an email query several days ago from the U.S. embassy in Kenya. They're trying to rebuild their small, uncataloged reference collection, destroyed by the bombing of 1998. As you might imagine, their want-list includes some old, obscure, "gray lit" of the governmental and semi-governmental breeds. As you might also imagine, I'd like to help the Nairobi Embassy rebuild in any way possible. I'd like to place all my imagined virtues at their disposal: my years of tracking down the obscure, my understanding of the out-of-print marketplace and government publications, my devotion to aggressive service. Then I took a good look at the list.

Have your eyes ever glazed over from trying to read long strings of acronyms? I had a hard time focusing. I checked to make sure that these were English citations. Yep, the acronym-laden titles were peppered with "and's" and "the's" and the occasional "agency" or "conference."

Then there were the vague titles like Voting Handbook—no author, no imprint, no date—titles that could have been published by any county, state, federal, or international agency from now back to 1776. And the Anti-Fraud Handbook, again without a hint of source or date. I imagined the most obscure vest-pocket, gutter-stapled pamphlets, perhaps products of Roosevelt's WPA, impossible to find or replace.

So, what to do.

First things first: I clarified as many citations as possible on OCLC. Then I hit **Books in Print** for those that might possibly be current. Then there was the grab-bag of online resources—the out-of-print sites, GPO and other Web catalogs—and when you are truly desperate, straight Web searching with titles as phrases. I felt a bit like a structural engineer inspecting an old building for restoration. You shine the flashlight in the darkest cracks, brush some ancient dust away, jab the walls, climb up and down and back up again and say to the customer with a deep sigh, "well, we can do this and we can do that, but the other thing? Can't be done."

Though it's probably true in any career, after a decade or so in the business of acquisitions, you like to imagine there's not much you can't find, or (for the truly long-lost) that you can't officially pronounce dead. When someone hands you a list where, despite your most imaginative searching, half of the titles remain not only unbound but unidentified, that feels a bit like failure. "Well," you say to yourself, "I'm no magician. I can't make these things materialize, especially when I've got so little to go on."

True enough, but isn't that what you really want? To be the magician? When that call comes in asking you to purchase Jane Wildwoman's new History of Ashpile County, you'd like to respond "ya know, when I saw that title in last month's Dingus Review I thought of you and bought a copy. They just finished cataloging it and the circulation delivery ought to be reaching your office right about... now!"

I think we'd all like to take those (romantically named) desiderata lists and make the dreams come true. We'd all like to take the flimsiest citations from our patrons and say, "yes, I know exactly which book you mean." And there's a little taste of failure when we can't.

Looking at the Nairobi Embassy's list, scratched now by my red-inked question marks, I took a deep breath and began to type a reply. "...this one is available... that one is out-of-print... as for the rest, unfortunately..." And I'm tempted to add, by way of apology, that I'd like to make his walls, his shelves, his books and newspapers reappear. I'd like to turn back time and erase his tragic loss. But I'm just an acquisitions librarian. 🐾



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mats, which many libraries cannot afford. Therefore, affordability of the e-books is a serious concern to the librarians.

A further concern related to the current lack of standards and the development of competing services which were developed using proprietary software. The content and the technology are intertwined at this point. E-books from **netLibrary.com** cannot be read using a **SoftBook** reader or a **Rocket eBook**. The development, led by **Microsoft**, for an open book standard should help minimize the problem.

Participants agreed that **netLibrary.com** had to begin with publishers in order to have a product to present to librarians, so someone had to take an initial risk. Now, it is the libraries, turn to take some risk. The introduction of e-books into the general collections of libraries will require as much consultation and involve as many different players as has the e-journals and other elec-

tronic resources. Even our brief foray into the issues highlighted the need for involvement by selectors, acquisitions staff, systems staff, reference librarians, circulation staff, and catalogers at the least. This means that the decision-making process for most libraries will take considerably longer than that for printed books. As with e-journals, the process will be time-consuming. There are many new issues including the technical, licensing, and access ones that must be negotiated to make the new resource work well for libraries.

Fortunately, other libraries and publishers are signing on and asking good questions that will help shape the future of **netLibrary.com** and other such ventures. If **netLibrary.com** listens as librarians request opportunities such as trial subscriptions to test the product, much like those offered by the publishers of the e-journals, more will take the plunge in the coming months.

Where will this all lead? No one can predict at this time. However, as with other

electronic products, the issue of source—direct or through a vendor—is certainly one of many considerations. Perhaps approval vendors can offer to announce new e-books added to the database, based on a library's approval profile. Vendors can also sell the e-books to libraries instead of or in addition to print books. Or, a company such as **YBP**, with its **Copyright Direct** software might be able to help libraries manage permissions for transactions for multiple users. However, most vendors are probably just in the preliminary stages of negotiation and are not ready to reveal any details of their possible future partnerships.

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