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Books and The Internet: Buying, Selling and Libraries

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It is no secret that the advent of the Internet has brought numerous opportunities and challenges to all involved in the creation and maintenance of library collections — publishers, purveyors of the materials that libraries collect and librarians themselves.

At the 2004 Charleston Conference, one discussion focused on a single aspect of this immense topic — buying and selling printed books over the Internet. Five panelists (two booksellers, one publisher and two librarians) presented their views of this phenomenon. Understandably, all noted that the Internet had caused changes in their work and all cited both pros and cons. No doubt other publishers, booksellers and librarians would have more to add to the discussion, but this group raised points that seem generally applicable.

The panel consisted of Rhonda Herman, Executive Vice President, McFarland & Company, Publishers; Bill Kane, Regional Sales Manager, Alibris; Brian Buckley, Vice President, Professional Sales & Marketing, Barnes & Noble; Sherman Hayes, University Librarian, William Madison Randall Library, UNC Wilmington; and Nancy Gibbs, Head, Acquisitions Dept., Duke University. According to Herman, publishers find the Internet a useful marketing tool and frequently send notices of new publications to librarians via email. Some provide their catalogs on the Web and/or in PDF format. In terms of actual sales, publishers continue to view vendors as the source of services that libraries want but publishers cannot reason-ably provide such as approval plans and cataloging. There has been a long-standing and success-ful culture created in which vendors and publishers each have a role to play and neither benefits from undercutting the other. At the same time, publishers have increasingly provided means for libraries to purchase materials directly from them over the Internet, largely because of customer demand.

For publishers, this is a two-edged sword. Given the ubiquity of the Internet, there is an expectation that every publisher will have a Web presence and permit a user-friendly interface. This is an added expense and a new area of endeavor. The publisher also must pay credit card fees and manage far more accounts with different entities. It may not be possible to track library orders separately from orders placed by individuals. On the upside, publishers receive payment more quickly and they are in more direct contact with at least part of their markets. Libraries have the benefit of being able to check availability in several sources. A book that might be out of stock at a vendor may be available from the publisher.

Booksellers such as Barnes and Noble and Alibris, which are not traditional library book vendors, as they have learned to deal with the library market, the former as a bricks and mortar bookstore that expanded onto the Internet and the latter as an Internet only bookseller. Buckley, of Barnes and Noble, noted that in ten years, online consumer book sales have grown to $3.4 billion. Libraries have followed suit and booksellers have learned to cater to their needs, offering competitive prices, large selection, purchase order accounts and fast, often free, delivery. He also pointed out that more and more public librarians use consumer Websites in collection development activities, reviewing prices, sales rankings and bibliographic information. That clearly extends to reviews and commentary as well. Libraries have continued to increase their use of online booksellers, especially for “rare” and hard-to-find items. Libraries enjoy the benefit of a large selection, good prices and speed. Barnes and Noble is even investigating additional library services such as processing, cataloging, standing orders, and integration with ILS vendors. If this progresses, libraries may find that librarians like to call “traditional” book vendors and consumer stores such as Barnes & Noble.

Kane, of Alibris, noted widespread expectations of speed among customers of all kinds in all kinds of markets. Libraries see this in their clientele and in turn expect it of booksellers. Alibris, selling only via the Internet and specializing in providing hard-to-find books and media, has found a market among libraries by supplying many things in small quantity to many customers. It is not a high volume or a high profit business, but it fosters precisely the kind of relationship that characterizes the Internet, where every customer receives equally high attention from the bookseller.

It is not only booksellers who have taken advantage of the possibilities of the Internet. In many ways, libraries have driven the development of Internet-based book selling, requesting many of the same kinds of services from Internet suppliers as they have long received from traditional library book sellers. One of the primary hurdles for libraries in the early days of the Internet was the necessity of purchasing by credit card rather than using a purchase order and receiving invoices tailored to their specific needs. This frustration has eased as some booksellers have established means of dealing with library purchase orders, and more and more libraries have been able to obtain credit cards for acquisitions use.

The Internet has proven to be every bit as much a wonderland for librarians seeking materials for collections as it has for the everyday shopper who can find just about anything he or she can imagine on the Internet with comparison shopping thrown in as well. Thus, locating and purchasing obscure, even rare, materials can be done at one’s PC. For librarians comparison shopping covers more than price because availability and condition are also very important to libraries, as are speed of ordering and delivery.

Both Gibbs and Hayes spoke of the many advantages accruing to libraries from the ability to purchase materials online. Most librarians who have tried this purchase method are aware that there are both pros and cons. Gibbs noted that postage can be expensive, purchasing statistics are not available, and there are many more vendors to deal with and to set up in the ILS, and vendors may not keep their stock information up to date.

Probably most libraries do some online ordering, but I wonder how many have gone as far as UNC Wilmington where enthusiasm runs very high. It was clear from Hayes’ comments that UNC Wilmington has shifted most of its acquisitions purchasing to the Internet. By purchasing fully 70% of books and media online using a credit card, UNC Wilmington has been able to reduce costs, save staff time and increase speed. They buy both used and new books online and have been able to find items for Special Collections that would never even have been identified just a few years ago. Many persons in the library, including the Director himself, use the credit card in this way. As Hayes put it, “The vendor doesn’t care who you are if you have a credit card!” (I was reminded of the oft-quoted cartoon “No one knows you’re a dog on the Internet.”) Hayes’ enthusiasm contrasted with the more conservative approach many libraries have taken toward online purchasing, and I think he is right. His library’s collection has benefited enormously, not just because the Internet exists, but because of the bold way in which UNC Wilmington has chosen to use it.

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developed with industry standards and metadata protocols. These interfaces will support interaction models that fit the unique requirements of their patrons for knowledge synthesis through interactive and accessible direct manipulation.

Attempts to develop such interfaces are on the way, but workable solutions for this significant challenge may take some time to realize. In the meantime, collection developers should be aware of the inherent ties between the collection and its user interface and seek an active role in guiding the development and future direction of the user interfaces serving their collections. An investment in the tip of the iceberg now can save the entire collection from sinking into invisibility. ❝

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Plagiarism, Googling, and the Mouse: Is The Internet Killing Our Ability To Do Research?

A Presentation to the 24th Annual Charleston Conference

by William M. Hannay, (Partner, Schiff Hardin LLP) <whannay@schiffhardin.com>

O
ing a couple of weeks ago, my
to the local high school look-
ing for our son, who is a Junior. He
needed to see a doctor about a (fortunatel,
minor) health problem. It turned out that there
was an opening in the doctor’s schedule that
morning, so her he quickly. Well, to make a
long story short, everybody was playing
“Where’s Waldo?” but nobody could find
our son. It wouldn’t have been like him to
ditch school, but where was he? People
were worried. Finally, he appeared of his own
acord, and the answer proved to be that he had
been in the school library. It was — and this is
the take-off point for my remarks today — the
last place anybody thought to look. The sur-
prise came, not because young William is a
good student, but because “everybody” knows
that “nobody” at Barrington High goes to the
library anymore.

Certainly the notion that “nobody” uses our
high school library is an overstatement, but I
don’t think it’s that much of an exaggeration.
And I don’t think that this phenomenon is unique
to our local High School. My sense is that it is
a phenomenon repeated at secondary schools
throughout the United States, and increasingly
at colleges and even graduate schools. When
“they” say that nobody goes to the library
anymore, what “they” mean is that students
are not using library books anymore to do
research. Students are allowed by their teach-
ers, even encouraged to substitute on-line “re-
search” for the more traditional process of deliv-
ing into, for example, hard-cover biographies,
books of literary criticism, or monographs on the
social sciences. Indeed, I know quite a few
students who don’t even know what the library
is for.

Commenting on the significance of the sur-
ev, Kate Wittenberg, director of Columbia’s
Electronic Publishing Initiative said: “students’
research habits, and their preference for
using Google and other search engines as their first step rather
than the library, is part of a more general cul-
tural and social change and I am not sure that
there is much that libraries, or anyone else,
can do to change this pattern.”

I hope that this assessment is wrong, and
that we can change the pattern of increasing dependence on Google and other search engines
as the principal research tool for students.
For it seems to me that there are at least three seri-
ous academic flaws that flow from this situa-
tion. First, reliance on Web browsing feeds an
unwholesome tendency towards what one com-
tentor has called “passive learning and graz-
ing for information,” rather than an active and
questioning search for truth. Second, relying
only on the Web denies students access to the
vast majority of useful knowledge, for the simple
fact is that the millions of pages of information
on the Internet represent only a tiny percentage
of the disciplined thought and writing available
in books. Third, Web-based research provides
students no guideposts or framework for analyz-
ing the importance, acceptance, or even venu-
city of the information they electronically stumble
across. (Is some unknown person’s BLOG, for
example, a valid and worthwhile authority to
cite in a paper . . . in the same league as peer-
reviewed journals or well-received treatises?)

Moreover — and I come now to the main
issue I want to discuss with you — it is undeni-
able that the Internet has become the single
greatest tool for academic dishonesty ever made
available to high school and college students.

With a well-chosen Google search and a few
clucks of that devilish little Mouse, a student can
find and download portions of articles or even
whole term papers and pass them off as his own.
Plagiarism is not new, but it used to be a
physically harder crime to commit when you had to
ded it all out by hand if you wanted to copy.

The increasing tendency of students to resort
to the electronic form of cheating has been moni-
tored in the past few years by several academ-
ics. One of the better known scholars in this
area is Rutgers professor Don McCabe, the
founder of the Center for Academic Integrity
at Duke University.

Prof. McCabe reports, for example, that, in
a survey of 14,000 college students at 23
schools, more than one in five students admit-
ted to cheating on a test in the past year. More-
over, according to McCabe, the fastest grow-
ing form of cheating is taking information from
the Internet and passing it off as the student’s
own work. See Chicago Sun-Times, July 25,
2004, p. 16. While ten percent of college stu-
dents admitted to Internet plagiarism in 1999,
that number rose to around forty percent in 2003,
continued on page 36

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