Library Acquisitions: Practice & Theory, Vol. 13, pp. 187-192, 1989
Printed in the USA.
0364-6408/89 $3.00 + .00

CHARLESTON CONFERENCE 1988

THE RUSSIAN PEASANT AND THE BIRD: A MORAL KEYNOTE

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As I listened to the rather sharp debate and differences of opinion over the last couple of days, I was reminded of one of the few stories I usually can tell from beginning to end without flubbing. It's a story of a Russian peasant walking through a forest who comes across a bird that is very seriously injured. The peasant doesn't really know what to do, so he picks up the bird, and there, at the side of the road, he spies some fresh cow manure. Because the peasant has to leave, he sticks the bird in the cow dung . . . Later the bird revives and begins to sing! A wolf passing by hears the bird and runs over, pulls the bird out, and eats the bird. Now all folktales have morals; this one has three: It's not always your enemy who sticks you in it; and it's not always your friend who pulls you out of it; but most of all, when you're in up to here, don't sing!

Thus, I'll begin by pointing out as you're sitting, thinking about how to solve the problems we've been discussing: Don't look for universal solutions! There aren't any. Our society is just too complex; and each library, publisher, and vendor will have to deal with the issues a little bit differently. It's like research: it has gotten much more complex in recent years.

We live in a society in which we tend to pretend that we are rational. We talk about planning strategy or solving problems in a rational way, but how many problems at your institution or corporation are actually solved in this manner? How many problems does our government solve in such a rational manner? We wait until a crisis is upon us before we sit down and begin to deal with it.

Let me illustrate what I mean with two quite different examples. The first is from a societal perspective. In the recent Presidential campaign, one of the candidates talked about illiteracy in the "cradle of education," Massachusetts. I've heard forty percent as being the number of citizens in that area who are functionally illiterate. Now if that isn't a crisis, what is? What is society doing about it? Well, at least society is beginning to take note.

Closer to home, we are facing budgetary crises on many of our campuses. We're talking about them but not doing a great deal except to pass on the higher costs in the form of higher tuition. Are we going to wait until tuition reaches the point at which a student revolt is triggered? Do we have to delay until a bona fide crisis is upon us before we try to deal with it?

The point I'm leading up to is that we already have a crisis in managing scholarly communications. We are already living with the results, and everyone, I suspect, is going to be affected in one way or another. Some will benefit, but most will see themselves as losers. The scholarly communications system can be patched, but the patch will provide temporary support only. I don't think there is any turning around; I believe we are on the way toward creating a new system of scholarly communications.

As I sat and listened to many of the fine presentations, I learned quite a bit, and I think others learned a lot as well. But why weren't these discussions taking place three, four, or five years ago? One conclusion I've reached – and I base this on my experience as a librarian, editor, and publisher – is that vendors need librarians, librarians need vendors, and publishers (if they're smart) need both. There are undeniable interrelationships. What's happened to these relationships is what has fascinated me as I've sat and listened. We are not one large, happy family. The current problems associated with serials economics have driven a sharp wedge among us. We are also struggling with a system which is badly overloaded; that is, the scholarly and scientific publication system is producing too many publications for the system to assimilate effectively. Librarians, publishers, editors, and readers are over-burdened. It's a supply-driven system that we are struggling with, and it must be re-examined. Whether we are aware of it or not, it has already come under some scrutiny.

What's driving the scholarly communications system? Without question it is the academic reward system. It's not just tenure; it's promotion, pay increases, and recognition within one's discipline or profession. The library profession can rail against the system, but librarians can't change it. It is the academy that will have to initiate the necessary changes. I know that academic administrators, including some presidents, are increasingly worried about the situation. So are a growing number of academics.

On my campus, as is true on many other campuses, there is great pressure to improve the quality of undergraduate teaching. There's also a growing desire to develop instructional software in order to improve the quality of undergraduate instruction. But what happens when it is time for promotion, tenure, and pay increases? Who gets the rewards? Those who develop innovative courses, or those who obtain the large grants and who publish?

When I arrived at Michigan, the Provost advised new faculty where to place their priorities in order to succeed in the University of Michigan environment. He told us that, while he personally held master teachers in great respect, those who didn't have tenure should not spend an inordinate amount of time trying to improve the quality of classroom instruction. If achieving tenure was a goal, we were to keep in mind that research and original scholarship was the "coin of the realm." That was just a reality of life at the University he explained to us. Research and publication is the engine that drives the contemporary research university.

There is currently a great deal of debate about how to achieve a better and more acceptable balance between teaching and research. I think we will begin to see some change in the years ahead, but for the immediate future the publication-driven reward system will continue to cue faculty on where to place their priorities.

If one were to accept the premise that the reward system can be changed (and most academics would probably not accept this as likely), the information or paper explosion would disappear almost overnight. But until the academic reward system is overhauled, the current system will keep chugging along becoming ever more cumbersome.

Our predicament is exacerbated by the fact that we are playing, I suspect, in a zero-sum resource game: as the number of new journals grows, librarians will be forced to make some very difficult cancellation decisions. Some of us have already begun to make those decisions.

Today I want to talk about two library myths. The first myth is that "Bigger is better." The second myth is that "Faculty are effective users of libraries." Libraries and bibliographic tools have become so complicated that in a sense we have created a thicket that would challenge Brer Rabbit. I'm willing to assert there are very few people who can use a large research library effectively. And I would include professional librarians. A reference librarian from one specialty may not be able to navigate effectively the literature of a related specialty.

We also need to examine who uses libraries. If faculty are not obtaining information from the library, where and how are they getting their information? What might happen if those who fund libraries were to learn that faculty members were obtaining information from sources other than libraries?

It is relatively easy to catalog user preferences and to predict user seeking behaviors. One user preference that keeps reappearing in the literature—going back at least fifty years—is the desire for convenience of access. Convenience influences behavior, whether it's the location of a library branch or the location of a Seven/Eleven store. Are libraries convenient to get to and convenient to use? In most cases, the answer is no.

We have become a society that expects (probably due to television and online systems) instantaneous responses. Users also seek easy-to-use, simple, user-friendly systems. The campus has its version of the easily accessible convenience store: the departmental reading room—which is usually not part of the formal campus library system. This is a little room where graduate students and faculty get together. Only a few thousand dollars' worth of subscriptions may be located in the reading room, but these small collections are important. When a professor is looking for an article, he may first ask his colleague if he has the article, and next he checks the reading room. I label these collections the "Seven/Elevens" of academe. They serve an important purpose, and even if "official libraries" don't fund them, they exist. Why? Because they are *convenient* and *easy to use.*

A few months ago, after I left library administration, I jacked up my courage enough to tell a distinguished historian, who happens to be a friend, that I didn't think many of his colleagues could use the library very well. He was startled, and at first I thought he was going to get angry. But then he stopped, stepped back, visibly relaxed, and replied, "You know, Dick, you're right." It worries him, and it worries most of his colleagues because they are having problems keeping abreast of changes in the literature of their disciplines and they're afraid others will find out; they believe they're expected to know the literature.

We librarians are equally insecure because we don't necessarily have the credentials or the subject expertise scholars possess, and therein lies a certain dilemma. Consider for a moment the researcher who must deal with a complex literature—for example, economic trade with Korea. How many sources can be identified? I found the results incredible! We performed a database search of 79 files from Dialog and retrieved 22,388 citations by crossing economics with Korea. Now, obviously that's got to be whittled down, but who's going to do the work? We found articles, books and reports in indexes—paper form, CD-ROM, and electronic formats—government documents, maps, and speeches. A researcher confronted with such a prospect might decide the results possibly wouldn't justify the effort and stop the search.

Reference librarians deal with complex searches every day. But what about the researcher who has a project once every six months, and who must work with a literature that is changing rapidly—what chance does he or she have to be an effective retriever of information?

That's the situation I envision when I assert that faculty can't use the library. It's not necessarily their fault, nor is it necessarily due to a lack of trying; it's just that libraries are complex. But if we were simply to acknowledge the complexities, we might be taking a first step toward a constructive solution or at least making some progress at dispelling this myth.

"Bigger libraries are better libraries" – that's my favorite myth. I was speaking at another campus last week, planning to pursue this theme. During the introduction, the Provost of the University introduced the speakers. She was cordial and wanted to please the many librarians in the audience, so she couldn't resist telling them how the library was at the heart of the university. I swallowed hard and later begged her forgiveness as I told her that whenever I hear the phrase, "The library is the heart of the university" (and, by extension, that a bigger library is a better library), my immediate reaction (in politest terms) is Balderdash!

University officers are partly responsible for perpetuating this myth. They count collections; they brag to each other; they're just as competitive as the rest of us. "My library is bigger than your library." When I was at Berkeley, the Chancellor's office was very concerned about the size of UCLA's library and vice-versa. The same is true at Michigan. When I suggested to a former President at Michigan that he and his colleagues were partially culpable for perpetuating this myth, he at least smiled.

Until presidents and some faculty begin to recognize there may be other ways to measure libraries, such as Dick Rowe was mentioning earlier – access, quality of services – we will continue to build bigger and bigger libraries. That's how the reward system is structured.

We're rewarded for building bigger libraries. We aren't rewarded for providing better access. We can't stop building, and I don't think librarians really want to stop. We're comfortable with building bigger and bigger collections, and so are the faculty.

How do we get out of this box? I don't know. I have offered some modest suggestions. I've been called the ARL's Don Quixote for suggesting that one small symbolic step would be to quit ranking libraries by size of collection and list them in alphabetical order. Let the *Chronicle of Higher Education* do what they want, but at least ARL would be saying to campuses that library directors thought there was something other than volumes which could be used to rank libraries.

One of the issues which came up at this meeting earlier and really surprised me – possibly because I'm no longer deeply involved with publishers, vendors, and acquisitions librarians – is the lack of trust that currently exists. I started off by saying we're all in this together, and yet we no longer seem to trust each other or our motives. There are a lot of possible explanations. Earlier in the meeting I mentioned the Richard Abel Company because, when I was an acquisitions librarian in the 1960s, I thought Abel was an excellent jobber. We didn't agree with Dick all the time, but we viewed his firm as looking out after our best interests as well as their own.

I'm a bottom-line oriented person, and I think most vendors and publishers are too. But when we focus so singlemindedly on the bottom line as many currently do, there is a danger that something important will be lost in the process. We've lost that special feeling, that special relationship that goes beyond the bottom line. In the case of vendor-library relationships, someone at this meeting told me it's no longer possible for an American jobber to achieve excellence. I don't agree. I think it's important for a domestic jobber to figure out how the success of Harrassowitz can be replicated. Such an effort might cause a temporary dip in the profit picture for a while, but I'll bet in the long term the firm would prosper. We need excellence. We don't have enough excellence, and this is a perfect opportunity for a firm to separate itself from its competitors. I know about the obstacles, but companies in other fields have been successful, so we know it can be done.

Dick Rowe is right in pointing out that universities are beginning to value their research differently. They're being forced by economic circumstances to do so. I've argued in several presentations and papers that universities should become more active as publishers. I believe universities should get back into the publishing business. There are several reasons to justify taking such a step. It's not a vindictive counter-stroke aimed against the commercial publishers; it's a logical strategy. Our university spends almost $100,000,000 each year in support of libraries and information technology. (I'm including heat, light, building, library, computers, telephone, etc.) Even at a large university this is not a trivial sum.

We have already made a mammoth commitment, and we are *wired*—boy, are we wired! And we're not the only campus that is electronically wired; lots of campuses are rapidly becoming networked. Since universities are making enormous investments in information technology, how will universities justify these expenditures to themselves, alumni, faculty, and to the taxpayer? The way to do this is to exploit these tools to the fullest.

On our campus, we are involved in a project called EXPRES. EXPRES is a multi-million dollar software development project funded by the National Science Foundation. It's a joint project with Carnegie-Mellon. The objective is to make it possible to automate every step in the NSF grant review process. In order to accomplish this ambitious objective, the system must handle graphics and pictorial data as well as text.

Universities are almost to the point where they can use their information technologies, if so inclined, to produce journals electronically without any concession to quality of pictorial or graphics material. I'm not suggesting electronic journals are in our immediate future—I don't mean that at all. What I mean is that universities will shortly have the capacity to produce journals and/or other publications either in *electronic* form or in the old-fashioned way, in *paper* format, and they're going to be able to produce publications in ways that are economical.

I've heard university press people and librarians say, "Dick, you can't do that. There's no money! You can't allocate part of your budget to this kind of an activity." My answer takes the following tack: "We have universities spending $100,000,000 on technology. Don't tell me they can't publish journals if they wanted to. You mean they couldn't reallocate two, three, four, or five million dollars for a few years to start journals? I don't believe it."

Journals aren't going to stop appearing. New journals will continue to arrive on the scene, probably more next year than this year. What I'd like to see is more competition injected into the process over the next ten years.

If universities became more active as publishers, this development would have an impact on the commercial publishing sector. It would also have an impact on university presses and libraries. If I had more time I could develop different scenarios on what might happen, some of them very positive.

Will universities get more involved? I don't know. They *can*, and some officials are at least talking about it. Some officials are beginning to realize that some journals we've been talking about these last three days generate revenues in the millions, and it hasn't gone completely unnoticed that the fellow who happens to own the 55-meter yacht which a couple of speakers have referred to can also afford to pay over a billion dollars for a U.S. publishing firm. So there may be a temptation among some to use these new information technologies to generate revenues.

Something else that hasn't been mentioned by any of the speakers is copyright. If universities hope to exchange information freely and equitably, they must deal with the copyright issue. If universities publish a journal they can also become the copyright holder. Bye-bye royalties. If one thinks about these issues long enough, the pieces begin to fall logically into place. I'm not suggesting that today's journals are going to disappear; I don't believe that for a moment. But I do believe over time we might see the emergence of a new presence, and this will have an effect on the economics of publishing.

I believe there is the basis for the organizations represented in this room to recreate the synergistic relationships that somehow have been lost in the chase for the dollar. This could happen in the years ahead. The publishing industry has been transformed into what I term a "publishing oligarchy," and many values have changed. We've seen changes in some of the most venerated firms. Without judging bad or good, we can say the publishing world *has* changed. We're not going to return to the old days. The question is, how can we now pick up the pieces and develop strategies that will best meet the needs of all three parties: publishers, vendors, and librarians? It's a big challenge, but one worth accepting.