Learning from the Past

Over the years since Library Resources and Technical Services *began publication in 1957, many fine papers have appeared in the journal. From time to time, we will republish an important paper that contributed in a significant way to the theory of the field or that identified and addressed a unique problem. These papers will be published with a new introduction that revisits the themes of the original paper. "The Acquisitions Librarian as Change Agent in the Transition to the Electronic Library," by Ross Atkinson, first appeared in 1992 (36, no. 1 [January 1992]: 7–20). This essay received the "Best of* LRTS *Award" for papers published in 1992. In it, Atkinson investigated the role of the acquisitions librarian in handling new technology and proposed new functions and relationships for acquisitions within the library. We have asked Atkinson to reconsider the ideas he explored in his original paper. His new introduction proceeds the award-winning essay.—Editor*

Reflection on "The Acquisitions Librarian as Change Agent in the Transition to the Electronic Library"

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The premise of this paper on the "acquisitions librarian as change agent," originally presented in 1991, was that acquisitions, of all the major library functions, was arguably the least prepared for the transition to a primarily digital information environment. At the same time, however—so the argument went—acquisitions was uniquely positioned, because of its specialized business skills and experience, to lead the way in what we would later call reappropriation, that is, the academy's resumption of the responsibility for the publication or distribution of some or all of the scholarly information it produces. (Today, in the era of SPARC [Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition], High Wire Press, Project Muse, Project Euclid, E-Scholarship—just to name a few—the view that information services has a responsibility for the entire process of information exchange from the writer to the reader is self-evident; twelve years ago, however, it was still a

relatively vague abstraction.) The paper suggested, therefore, that acquisitions should make preparations to abandon its traditional operation and to assume a new role in the library and the academy as publication facilitator.

I feel that someone else wrote this paper—because I was someone else in 1991—and I infer now that the person who wrote it was making three implicit assumptions:

- Most scholarly publications would shift online relatively soon ("the floodgates will open")—certainly well before the end of the 1990s.
- In such a primarily online environment, the traditional function of acquisitions would become increasingly superfluous. Only an accountant would really be needed, to pay the bills.
- The whole process of scholarly communication, especially those areas that were dominated by

commercial science publishers, was defective—and would likely collapse, sooner or later, of its own weight. It was important that the library be prepared, therefore, with alternative methods that scholars would be able to use to exchange information effectively.

All three of these assumptions have obviously turned out to be entirely mistaken. While the writer of the paper acknowledged the conservative nature of the academy, he totally overestimated the speed with which the academic community would move to electronic publishing. I am sure he would have been shocked in 1991 to learn that over 80 percent of Cornell's materials budget in 2003 was still being spent on traditional materials. He would probably have been somewhat less surprised, although certainly disappointed, to learn that the real leadership in the transition to electronic scholarly publishing has been provided (admittedly with some notable exceptions) by commercial journal publishers—and that they have brilliantly contrived new methods (licensing, bundling) to increase their revenues in the online environment beyond even what they had managed to achieve in the era of print publishing.

One (admittedly obvious) expectation in the paper that certainly has turned out to be true is that books would move much more slowly online than journals. Unlike commercial journal publishers, scholarly monographic publishers, especially university presses, have for the most part developed no cohesive business plan for moving online—in fact, one has the impression that some of them may have been assuming that no such shift to electronic monographic publishing was ever going to happen. When third-party vendors, moreover, have sought to make scholarly monographs accessible online, the restrictions imposed by the publishers, because of their apprehension about the effect on paper sales, have often been so stringent as to guarantee that monographs would not be routinely used in electronic form. The unwillingness of monographic publishers to devise a plan for online publishing (and the reluctance of scholars in the humanities and the narrative social sciences to demand such a plan) is now leading to a genuine crisis in academic monographic publishing that will have long term effects on the ability of scholars to exchange information as a formal, extended narrative.

The second implied assumption made in the paper, that acquisitions as a function would become increasingly unnecessary as scholarly information moves online, also has turned out to be wildly misconceived. In fact, the exact opposite has happened. Acquisitions adapted rapidly and adroitly to online publication, with the result that it has become in many ways even more central to library operations than it was in the traditional environment. This is the case in part because publishers and vendors now play a more active and persistent role in the online era: in many cases, digital information, unlike its print counterpart, is no longer transferred from the publisher to the library, but rather resides on the publisher's server, to which the library must maintain access. Acquisitions, as the operation responsible for the business and human connections between the library and the vendor, has therefore become more indispensable than ever.

How, then, could the person who wrote this paper in 1991 have been so myopic as to assume (assuming he was assuming it) that acquisitions would become increasingly superfluous in a primarily online environment? The answer probably lies in the third faulty assumption. Acquisitions plays such a central role in libraries today, in part precisely because the traditional business paradigm of scholarly publishing remains largely intact. In 1991, on the other hand, it seemed (I believe, in retrospect) much more apparent that the end of scholarly publishing as we knew it was rapidly approaching—and that it was only a matter of time before the academy would recognize this and rise up to reappropriate its rightful responsibility for disseminating the fruits of its own labors. Clearly no such revolutionary reappropriation has come to pass.

Have, then, any of the main claims and predictions made by the writer of this paper twelve years ago turned out to have any manifestation in reality? Not really—or perhaps more to the point: not yet, because scholarly publishing is in fact continuing to evolve, and that evolution seems to be accelerating. New publishing alternatives and paradigms are even now being proposed, and much depends upon the extent to which any of these are successful—perhaps most notably what we have recently come to call open-access publishing. Although the economics of open access remain to be tested and proven, the concept has at least two enormous advantages over the traditional model. First, it would make scholarly information freely available to all who need it (or at least to all who have Internet access). Second, and nearly as important, it would make the price of publishing such information highly visible to individual scholars and their funding agencies.

If the shift to open access publishing is in the best interest of scholarship and higher education—and there is no doubt to my mind that it would be—then the academic library community must move quickly to answer two closely interrelated questions: (a) How can the library increase the potential or likelihood for such a shift? and (b) What adjustments will need to be made to library services in an open access environment? The point is, of course, that the answers to

both questions may well center in large part on the library's acquisitions function.

The single most important prerequisite for a successful open access publishing program will likely be the availability and acceptance of a systematic and coordinated process for the distributed funding of open-access publication. Creating and participating in such a system will prove to be a substantial challenge, in part because the funding to support such publication would derive from many different and independent sources—for example, foundation funding, government grants, the individual author, and various institutional sources, including probably the library materials budget. There can be no question, in any event, that if such an acceptable and reliable model could be developed and vetted soon, it would greatly increase the chances that open-access publishing would become a new norm for scholarly communication.

The ultimate challenge and opportunity, therefore, for the acquisitions librarian as change agent and facilitator of reappropriation—heralded admittedly somewhat prematurely in this article written in 1991—may well lie in the conceptualization and implementation of a distributed business plan for open-access publishing. No other operation in the academy is arguably as well equipped and inclined to create and coordinate such a plan as the library's acquisitions function. Perhaps the time has now come, therefore, for the acquisitions community finally to decide whether it is willing to invest the effort and to take the risk in providing such leadership.