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Acquiring Minds Want To Know: What Are Our Obligations

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No Abstract

Ogburn, Joyce L. (1993). "Acquiring Minds Want To Know: What Are Our Obligations?" Against the Grain, 5(5),46. Version of Record Available From <http://content.lib.utah.edu>



Are there rules that govern the practices of librarians, vendors and publishers? Clearly there are ethical considerations that guide our behavior as individuals. Acquisitions librarians are in the midst of making formal their code of ethics. But what other, perhaps more subtle expectations have evolved over time in the complex relationship between these three parties?

The article in the June 1993 issue of *Against the Grain* on "Cloth Over Paper or Paper Over Cloth - Up to You," by Katina Strauch and Heather Miller, dealt with the emerging change in librarian practices from buying hardbacks to paperbacks.

The respondents to the questions asked by Strauch and Miller seemed to indicate that certain practices are expected of librarians. It is this issue that I would like to address.

The article quotes publishers saying that they rely on the library market to purchase the hardcovers that underwrite the publishing of paperbacks for the student market. Further, there is the hint that libraries are somehow obligated to support the student market. Additionally it is implied that libraries are expected to subsidize the distribution of scholarly information. For example, from page 11, I quote: "I don't think that this issue will have a financial impact on vendors or librarians. They may be able to either buy more or less, but the question is: How will this affect the distribution of knowledge?" This is a legitimate question. However, is the librarian obliged to subsidize the distribution of knowledge at the expense of a direct and relatively definable clientele?

It can be argued that in a free market librarians, like any other consumer,

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should be able to purchase any form of a book (or journal or other information for that matter) that is available on the market. Librarians are obligated to spend the money of the institution as wisely as possible and to buy the best product for the best price. For many libraries, this means increasingly that paperbacks are being preferred over hardcover books.

On one hand we are addressing an economic issue. There is a precedent in the discrepancy of pricing in the serials market. The reason for differential pricing of journals has been one of anticipated use: publishers charge libraries more than individuals because they anticipate that journals will be used by more than one person. Library purchases also subsidize the low cost of subscriptions paid by individuals or members of societies/associations. For the most part, libraries are not charged more for the purchase of a book, even though more than one person will access to the book. (Recently, however, I have seen more examples where publishers are charging institutions a higher price than the one for individuals). So in the pricing both of serials and monographs it is assumed that libraries should subsidize prices for individuals.

On the other hand we are dealing with historical behavior and the expectations that have grown out of that behavior. In the case of selecting paperbacks rather than hardbacks, there are several sets of expectations at work. Librarians have demanded quality products that stand up to use and expect a good product in return for their dollars. As a result, librarians have traditionally preferred the hardcover product and publishers (and vendors) have come to expect that this preference will continue. Products, prices, and marketing approaches have evolved in response to this expectation.

Apparently the time has come to ask some hard questions about the present marketplace:

- Should librarians be concerned about the long term effects of this

change on the vendor community or the availability of paperbacks to students? i.e., what are their obligations to vendors and students?

- Should publishers publish two differently formatted and priced versions of the same book? Should they expect libraries to subsidize the paperback market by purchasing hardcover editions?
- Should vendors protect themselves by discouraging libraries from purchasing paperbacks through standing order or approval plans?

In all cases, librarians, publishers, and vendors, should their obligations be first to the community formed by the three or to their parent institution, their stock holders, or their owners; or is there an equal or higher duty to support the distribution of knowledge? In a complex market are there obligations that are neither ethical nor moral, and that perhaps transcend any other responsibilities?

How can we approach answering these questions? For one, we need a good model of the dynamics of the publishing/vending/library market. There is no agreement in the article on how the market is reacting to changes in librarian purchasing strategy. Secondly, we have to come to grips with the fact that librarian values are changing. No longer is the artifact/package as important as the content: content/information reigns over the artifact/package. Thirdly, we need to discover the unstated expectations of the role of each player in the market.

This column raises some questions for discussion — it is neither an indictment of any player's practices nor of their expectations of the market. It is intended to start a search for the unwritten rules that govern our behavior, and, if such rules exist, to determine how the rules (and the players) will be able to respond to changes, both now and in the future.

Any ideas out there? ☛