

## Guest Editorial

### The Coming Contest

If, as now seems likely, many of the services provided by publishers and libraries in the current print environment will be done increasingly by writers and readers for themselves once the most heavily used information becomes available online, opportunities for both libraries and publishers to provide their services to academic users well may diminish. While the new online medium will doubtless spawn new service possibilities, the plain fact is that there may not be enough room in a primarily online environment for both academic libraries and commercial publishers of specialized scholarly information to grow and to remain key players in the academic information services arena. It is possible that libraries, if they are to continue to fulfill effectively their functions as primary service agents, will decide either to take on additional responsibilities for specialized scholarly publishing—or that publishers, in order to survive and expand, will need (and will have the technical capacity) to assume many of the mediation and distribution functions previously performed by libraries.

If this is true, and either academic libraries or scholarly publishers—but not both—will eventually prevail in a primarily online environment, then which should it be? Of course, academic libraries will agree easily that ultimately libraries should succeed, because they are more directly concerned and better able to deal with the information needs of academic users. Publishers, or at least the commercial ones, are indeed business enterprises, and customer service is not the fundamental purpose of business despite the proclamations of the current

“quality” movement. The fundamental purpose of business is to stay in business: to grow and to increase return on investment. Customer service is merely a means to that end. If growth and revenue could be better achieved by ignoring or maltreating customers, then customers would be ignored or maltreated. Therefore, service quality is relatively simple for a business to define: high-quality services are those that generate increasing revenue, and low-quality services are those that do not.

In contrast, libraries have at their disposal no such straightforward method to measure quality of service, and are also obliged by their professional culture and their institutional commitments to view service not as a means but rather as an end—so that all actions taken and all resources expended are justified exclusively by that purpose. That being the case, what would happen, one wonders, if at a certain point academic libraries began to suspect that commercial vendors were developing a capacity to provide better service at a distance than libraries were able to provide on site? If service is the exclusive purpose of libraries, rather than a means to “stay in business,” then would libraries, seeing that publishers could do a better job, simply convert themselves into warehouses, and advise their institutions to use the funding previously spent on libraries to provide instead access to the services of publishers (which would by that time have expanded themselves into full-service scholarly information brokerages)?

Of course not. But the reason this will not happen is neither because libraries are imbued with some super-competi-

tive spirit, nor because libraries are necessarily equipped to provide better services, but rather because libraries know so little about the quality of the services they do provide, that they would probably never notice that an outside agency was capable of doing a better job. Because service is so difficult (in the absence of a convenient gauge like revenue) to monitor and assess, and because the real needs of academic users are so diverse and complex, and because the library has always had (by virtue of its proximity to its users) what amounts to a monopoly on campus for print information services, and finally because service is the library's only purpose for existence, the library has preferred and has been permitted to define service quality on the basis of whatever service levels it—the library—provides. Since high quality service is the only purpose for the existence of libraries, and since libraries exist, what they are providing must be high quality service. Libraries consequently will never be able to recognize, let alone admit, that another agency is providing academic information services superior to those provided by libraries, because that is by definition impossible. Only after users have in effect rendered libraries totally superfluous by abandoning them for commercial vendors will libraries in their current condition be able to recognize that their services were inferior.

What is to be done? To begin with, academic libraries need to acknowledge and to prepare for a situation in the not-too-distant future in which they will enter into a very real and strenuous competition with commercial scholarly publishers and other vendors to become the dominant information service providers for students and faculty users. The more online publication becomes the accepted mode, the more opportunities, temptations, and incentives libraries and publishers are going to find to bypass each other. While one result of this might be that libraries and publishers will become so preoccupied with each other's traditional activities that they will end up simply exchanging responsibilities over

time, a much more likely scenario is that one or the other will become the prevalent academic information provider. Academic libraries (and publishers) would be very foolish not to begin preparations now for that coming competition.

Second, as part of this preparation academic libraries must dispense with the mistaken notion that publishers and libraries are in entirely different businesses. Both libraries and publishers are fundamentally information intermediaries between academic writers and readers. It makes no difference whatsoever whether those services are understood as ends or as means. In a primarily online environment, moreover, it will be users (i.e., writers and readers) rather than libraries who define quality service.

Third, libraries need to begin learning as much as possible about specialized scholarly publishing. To this end closer links should be established with computer centers and university presses. The aim should be a condition in which a faculty member, having completed something for publication, will bring that material to the library. The library will then ensure that the material is referred to a nationally qualified editorial board; if the board accepts the item for publication, then it will be the library (after having done the necessary cataloging or indexing) that ensures through its links with other libraries around the nation and around the world that the item is published; that is, that it is made known and available to students and scholars who are interested in the subject.

Fourth, and perhaps most important, academic libraries now need to begin to concentrate on personalizing and humanizing relationships with their users, because it is only through continuous personal contact and interaction that libraries effectively can begin to assess and refine service quality. We have become so absorbed and preoccupied with the ability of computer mediated communication and publication to eclipse location as a factor in scholarly collaboration and information services that we have ignored—or at least resigned ourselves to

the unfashionability of discussing—the very real isolation and dehumanization that increasing reliance on online sources will necessarily entail. While proximity to users may no longer allow academic libraries to assume a service monopoly, it does continue to provide libraries with their greatest opportunity to tailor services (including publishing) to meet local user needs—services that are demonstrably superior to those available exclusively at a distance. It will be risky and difficult,

but there is no alternative: the more rapid the advances of information technology, the more willing academic libraries must be to invest in enhancing their human resources. This is the real challenge, and if we are able to meet it, then we will succeed finally in supplying a truly superior information service as defined not by ourselves but by the preferences of our users.


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