

Guest Editorial

Journal Costs: Perception and Reality in the Dialogue

As the debate on journal costs heats up, librarians are seeking or creating new opportunities for dialogue with publishers through ALA committees, conferences, retreats, and, ironically, journals. My own experiences wrestling with the issue have convinced me that this well-intentioned attempt at reason is doomed because it is founded on the false premise that the publishers whose journals are bankrupting us are earnest partners in the business of higher education.

Our image of the scholarly publisher is sadly out-of-date. We seem to imagine an elderly gentleman wearing a green eyeshade, sitting at a roll-top desk in a London office—a study, rather—near the British Museum. He spends his days writing letters of helpful advice and encouragement to young scholars, preparing them in his time-honored way for lives of productive authorship. Surely, if we can only catch his ear for a few hours of “dialogue,” he’ll realize what a fix we’re in and find a way to lower his prices and make us happy.

The reality is that most of the strain on our budgets is generated by the journals of a few publishers, owned and directed by large multinational holding companies with diverse interests. These conglomerates are rapidly acquiring firms engaged in all related aspects of the information business, such as telecommunications, printing, and database brokering. Their profits are considerable (e.g., Pergamon Journals’ pretax profit of £19,000,000 on a turnover of £49,000,000 in 1985). And in spite of our sincere attempts at dialogue, their credibility is almost exhausted. We’ve heard every imaginable excuse for this year’s price increases, from the fact that it’s an election year (per Robert Miranda, president of Pergamon Press, at ALA) to poor business judgment the previous year (Gordon & Breach, in a November 1987 mailing).

These publishers are not really in the business of education; their business is making money. Robert Maxwell, whose many holdings include Pergamon journals, recently laid out his approach to publishing in an interview in his own new journal, *Global Business* (Spring 1988, p.41+): “I set up a perpetual financing machine through advance subscriptions as well as the profits on the sales themselves. It is a cash generator twice over. It’s no use trying to compete with me.” His interviewer defines Maxwell’s original strategy: “If Pergamon could win the trust of scientists it could establish the standard journal in each specialisation, and that would give it a series of publishing monopolies . . . scientists are not generally as price-conscious as other professionals, mainly because they are not spending their own money.”

And Maxwell plans a chilling future for us: “I am determined that Maxwell Communication Corporation will be one of what I expect will be only ten surviving global publishing companies.” “MCC,” says the interviewer, “is moving over to electronic publishing as fast as possible . . . MCC is able to recycle the same piece of information, selling it several times over, having either bought it outright or paying a royalty that is less than the price the company can obtain by reselling it. In paper-based publishing, this process involves the additional cost of paper, printing, packaging, and transport, and in many sectors the market price is restrained by competition. None of those applies in electronic publishing, once a user has the equipment . . . that means that every additional sale can amount to pure

profit—and every use is metered and charged for, unlike books when they are plucked off a shelf.”

Whatever they may proclaim during our seemingly endless “dialogue,” the journal publishers causing the problem have their eyes on our materials budget and expect to get it—all of it. They use every possible twist of pricing, enumeration, and pagination to disguise price increases that are quickly gobbling up monograph and retrospective purchase funds and turning general academic libraries into science journal collections. Off the record, they describe us as powerless functionaries, unable to resist faculty pressure to subscribe, habitually attuned to approving bills for payment unquestioned, and capable of little else. And though they're few in number, the success of their current strategy will inevitably seduce others into joining them.

What do they suggest we do? Find more money to give them, that's what. Karen Hunter, vice-president at Elsevier, suggested at this year's ACRL/WESS conference in Florence that librarians should fund inflation by charging the faculty for library use and dunning local citizens and foundations. Publishers clearly regard library budgets as expandable, an attitude that is unfortunately reinforced whenever a prominent library succeeds in finding extra funds. This attitude is also fortified by the traditional mindset of those librarians who see it as our primary job to spend more money on materials and as heresy to address any other approach to the problem.

Now that resistance to price gouging is becoming widespread, publishers are hearing talk of boycotts and using legal bluff and bluster to squelch it. Martin Gordon, of Gordon & Breach, has written irate letters to librarians who have canceled his titles, including at least one threat to sue for complaining to an editor that issues of a certain journal are now being labeled as volumes. (In fact, 1988 issues of that title, *Early Child Development and Care*, are labeled as volumes on their covers, contributing to a 145 percent price hike this year.)

These publishers assume we are a captive market, compelled to acquire needed material from the only possible sources at whatever prices they choose to charge. Electronic publishing is no panacea; the publishers own the copyright and are quite capable of setting their prices by dividing our published book budgets by the number of units ordered.

In the long run, though, *we* hold the most important cards. The raw material of scholarly publishing, the research and writing, originates within the research community, as does the copyright to it. The commercial publishers are in the information conduit for historical and anachronistic reasons; there is no technical or economic reason why they must remain a part of it. Unthinkable as it might have seemed until very recently, the idea of the academy retaking control of the bulk of scholarly publishing is being forced into consideration by the practices of the commercial publishers themselves. Their bills simply cannot be paid indefinitely, and something must give.

I suspect that the sleeping giant of higher education is about to wake up to this problem, and that a long-term solution will be mandated by the faculties and chief administrators of universities and colleges, and by the professional societies. After all, scholarly information originates here in the academy; there's no reason why it shouldn't become a financial asset for education rather than a liability. If, in the distant future, “every use is metered and charged for,” I hope to find Robert Maxwell on the paying, rather than the receiving, end.

We do need further dialogue, then, but not with the commercial publishers. We already know their aims, and they know our weaknesses. Academic librarians and their colleagues in higher education need to sit down and devise a strategic long-range solution to the journal cost problem, together with serious academic publishers and booksellers who have as much to lose as we do if no solution is found. The strategy should be based on a realistic assessment of the situation, rather than the platitudes and prevarications that have dominated the other side of the dialogue up to now.

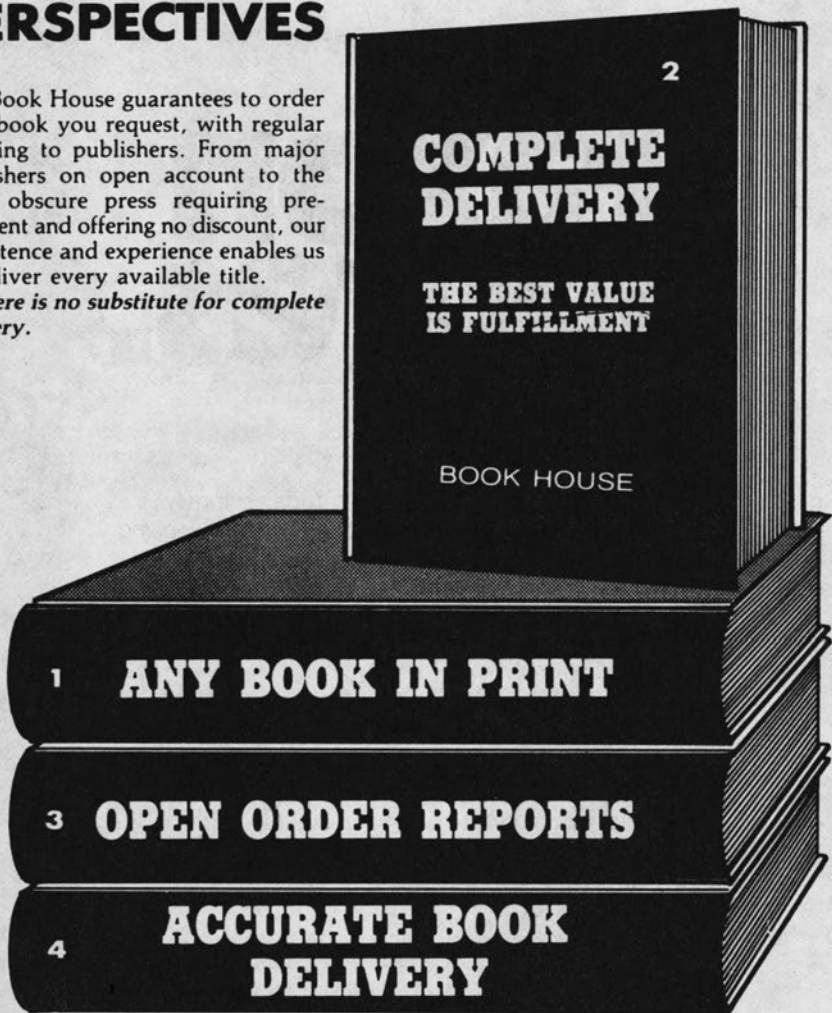
JAMES C. THOMPSON

James C. Thompson is University Librarian at the University of California-Riverside, and chair of ACRL's new discussion group on journal costs in academic and research libraries.—CM.

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