Against the Grain

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1996: A Booksellers View of the Year
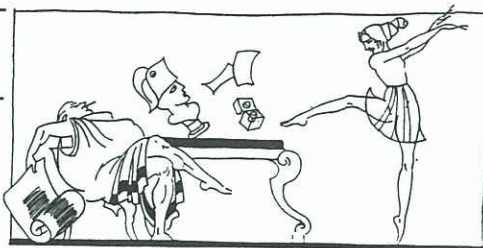
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1996: A Booksellers View of the Year

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Bookselling to academic libraries in 1996 saw the old and the new, trends we have lived with for years and trends that hint at the future. Budgets, technology, and outsourcing have dominated bookselling discussions in recent years. What was different this year was a feeling of acceptance of the budget situation, even if we do not like it, combined with rapid improvements in the way technology is changing how librarians and library users interact with booksellers. The big news was booksellers and other library service providers creating new tools for librarians to help control expenditures, perform tasks, and to change the way those tasks are performed.

The budget news was old news, book prices barely rising (see **Celia Scher Wagner**'s study in the November *ATG*, v.8#5, p. 60) and journals increasing at 4 or 5 times the inflation rate (see Web pages of the serials vendors). What is new in this old discussion is the rise of a new competitor for funds, access to electronic databases and alternative means of accessing and delivering information to users. In conversations with acquisitions librarians, directors, and bibliographers, I've heard stories of libraries increasing expenditures for these new forms of information by 100%-200%. Although the new forms are in great demand, little or no extra money is being added to tightly stretched budgets. This will exacerbate the trend seen in the recent ARL statistics of libraries adding fewer monographs each year. Surprisingly, there seems to be less hand-wringing over budgets and more problem-solving. It appears that the unpleasant reality of inadequate funding will be a factor in our environment for a long time, and we are learning to deal with that reality.

But budget problems are old news. What is interesting are some of the new tools available for coping with the change. Equally interesting is the fact that booksellers are cooperating with bibliographic utilities and developing their own bibliographic services. Technology brought two new developments in 1996, both a result of the Internet. First, the major booksellers began to offer libraries real functional access to their databases, through the Web, with the ability to place, cancel, modify, or check on orders. Telnet access has been available for several years, but this year saw booksellers migrate those services to the Web. The advantage for libraries is faster response times and more sophisticated functionality.

Academic Book Center brought up its integrated firm order and approval database on the Web and added the type of full functional access described above. One search provides information on a library's order regardless of whether it was placed as a firm order or processed as part of Academic's approval plans.

Yankee Book Peddler introduced its Gobi service in the spring and released its second version towards the end of the year. This updating and release of new versions is an indication that booksellers see their Web pages as important strategic selling tools. You will see continual updates and improvements to these Web pages and booksellers vying with each other to provide "new and improved" features.

Blackwells announced plans to add Web access to its customers in addition to their telnet access although by the end of the year had only gone into beta testing with several libraries. Other booksellers offer varying types of Web pages if only as electronic brochures.

The importance of Web access for librarians is the ability to do real work in their vendors' database regardless of when or where they are located. Librarians can transact business when it is convenient for them not when a customer service representative can answer the phone, an email, or a letter. Bibliographers and others involved in collection development can review and activate approval form selections, do keyword searches, or just check on the newest cookbooks. This will help deliver books faster and answer questions more quickly, thus better serving library users. The most recent releases of these Web pages give librarians improved functionality including the ability to download order information, request management reports, and link to additional databases. These technological advancements help acquisitions and collection development librarians perform their jobs faster, better and easier. These services are also a great deal; they are free.

The other development was booksellers offering serious and comprehensive outsourcing, cataloging, and shelf-ready processing services. Most notably OCLC took its PromptCat service out of beta testing and went into full production with Academic Book Center, Ambassador Books, Blackwell North America, and Yankee Book Peddler. OCLC's PromptCat service, which is really automated copy cataloging, became most popular with approval plan libraries after OCLC committed to updating all CIP records as soon after publication as possible. Libraries could receive cataloging even before they received their books. Towards the end of the year, OCLC announced that they would begin testing their ability to download the information to the library. This will make it possible for libraries to receive shelf-ready books from their vendors and all the benefits of OCLC's cataloging services. Academic Book Center and Yankee will be the test sites for this service.

Sadly, from a bookseller's point of view, not much changed in actual bookselling in 1996. Most of the development was in the application of new technologies to old problems and the integration of bookselling and shelf-ready processing. Perhaps next year we will actually talk about books. 🎵