

2009

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Recommended Citation

Davis, Mitchell (2009) "New Books from Old, Reprise - Project Ibid & the Power of Ideas," *Collaborative Librarianship*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 3 , Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29087/2009.1.3.07>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol1/iss3/7>

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New Books from Old, Reprise - Project Ibid & the Power of Ideas

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Introduction

Mitchell Davis was invited by Collaborative Librarianship to contribute through a regular column his insights and perspectives on the general conversation on where libraries are headed, how they are valued by their communities and how they can constructively unlock that value over the coming years in ways that stay true to their mission. As an innovator and motivator in the field of library and non-library collaboration, Mitchell offers unique perspectives on future developments in libraries that capitalize on their resources and specializations.

Before heading up BiblioLife, Mitchell co-founded BookSurge in 2000, a lead organization in print-on-demand services and technology. After co-founding Lowcountry Media Group (LMG) in South Carolina, a multimedia design and development firm, throughout most of the 1990s, Mitchell worked with LMG on print/internet cross-marketing systems. For at time he also was a business integration and development manager for Amazon.com. Mitchell also has served as consultant to leading non-profit organizations on the development of internet tools for improving community dialog and fundraising.

Given his expertise, Mitchell is well positioned to discuss the "grey areas" of the library world, those areas that are not well understood or given the thought and attention that perhaps they deserve, namely, the compatibilities, connections and collaborations between the world of commerce and libraries and other non-profit organizations.

The Grey Area Column

I met David Cohen, the Dean of the College of Charleston library, about three months

ago. The College of Charleston is my old alma mater (93') and our offices are only about 7 blocks from each other. Our initial meeting was a little awkward (as initial meetings can sometimes be between "vendors" and libraries), but communication was open and constructive. All you can hope for in a first meeting really.

At the conclusion of the meeting he took me into his office and showed me around. He pulled from his bookshelf an article he had authored for the publication North American Serials Interest Group and handed it to me. As he did, he casually related his involvement in a digitize and print-on-demand project called Project Ibid.

"When was this?" I asked. When he responded, "1993" my knee jerk response was - "Damn, that was before Netscape 1.0". As an unofficial historian of the short and volatile history of print-on-demand I was, of course, skeptical. But I took the article and David and I agreed to follow up. I read the article in bed a couple of days before meeting David for breakfast and ended up reading parts of it aloud to my wife as she tried to fall asleep (she is used to such behavior).

The article outlined a system where libraries would be allowed digitize out-of-print monographs (still in copyright) when one was not available in print from the publisher. The holding library would fill a request from the library seeking the book by digitizing the book and using "print-on-demand" equipment to manufacture a copy for the requesting library. Of course, the publisher would be paid a royalty for that sale. The book would be delivered via the existing ILL system. What was not to like about the elegance of such a proposal? A small group of librarians (David at the College of Charleston, some others at Cornell, primarily)

got a small grant to prototype the idea at Cornell and pitch publishers on the idea.

Project Ibid focused on copyrighted content because that was the pain area in the library at the time. David explained that university and monograph publishers had cut print runs in the 1990's and books going out of stock was common. Libraries were stuck in that no man's land between the past and the future. But, interestingly, when the publishers inevitably balked at the idea Project Ibid did not change its focus to out-of-copyright works. First, non-destructive book scanning and post-processing was not yet scalable. And secondly, with no Internet or "Long Tail" market there was no critical mass of customers for those old books. So, like many good ideas that surface before the world is ready, the project faded.

If the article came out today, it would still be ahead of its time. I realized that David and his colleagues at Cornell, including Anne Kenney and others, were important players in the history and development of thinking regarding print-on-demand and digital book distribution. They could not have foreseen the numerous ways publishers can stand in their own way. Theirs was not the first boat to crash upon those rocks.

"Sometimes great ideas happen too soon"

This is what David was saying to me as I walked out the door, partly in response to my Netscape quip. And he was right. Being the founder of a "pioneer" print-on-demand company I felt David's pain. We were pitching the idea of printing one-book-at-a-time to publishers in 2001 and were getting laughed out of buildings all over Manhattan. One large publisher, after lauding the benefits of our system ("you can print one book anywhere in the world and ship it locally!") said with a straight face: "we are never the first to do anything." I could not tell if there was any pride mixed in that statement, but it is entirely possible. I honestly cannot even imagine the macabre scenes that played out in those publishing offices back in 1993 as David pitched the

idea. There literally was no context in which the book trade could place it at the time.

I should also note that what actually inspired me to read aloud to my wife in bed was not the foresight as to the future of publishing as much as the poetry of the article. The first paragraph is a beautifully articulate description of the existential struggles within the business of academia (and, hell, the business of life in general). I was hooked at the first passage:

"Library work is replete with ironies...The ironies seem to multiply when you introduce publishers and scholars into the equation."

To quote my favorite beat poet Richard Brautigan in the book Trout Fishing in America -- "Bertrand Russell could not have said it any better".

The whole article can be read on Google Books here: <http://bit.ly/inPfv>

The rest of the book is also pretty fascinating - with articles written 15 years ago sporting titles like New Strategies for Publishing with gems like this:

"Technological improvements in the efficiency of producing print will delay, but not avoid the day of economic reckoning for most publications"

Yikes.

A Stranger in a Strange Land

I am a relative newcomer to the library world. In a previous life (2000-2007), I was a founder of a company called BookSurge, which became the world's first distributed POD retailing and manufacturing system. We entered that business very naïve as to the ways and means of publishing, printing and book distribution. We brought a beginner mind to the effort that helped us discover a new and better way of doing things from the pieces of existing systems.

When we sold BookSurge to Amazon.com in 2005, we had built distributed POD facilities in 7 countries around the world and had contracts to develop 4 more. Our temperament as committed entrepreneurs, our chemistry as a team and our ability to execute helped us overcome many obstacles and succeed. But what also helped us was the fact that the world had changed so much since the days of Project Ibid.

Here are three reasons why things were easier for us:

- Online Bookselling - The Internet was born and soon after Amazon re-invented not only bookselling, but consumer behavior in general. Amazon removed the bounds of physical retailing and created a retailing platform that expanded infinitely the selection of media products available for purchase. We found out people will buy unexpected things if given the opportunity. The "Long Tail" was born and book publishing was re-invented. Where previously books selling less than 100 copies a year were a hassle, now it was a business. So were books that sold 5 copies a year.
- Self Publishing - in the late 90's digital printing ushered in a new phenomenon as tens of thousands of authors began publishing books outside the scope and guise of traditional publishers. Some of them very successfully. The growth of this business helped push digital workflows and drove the print equipment vendors to produce more appropriate equipment for true (and profitable) one-book-at-a-time. Traditional publishers owe a certain debt of gratitude for the current state of the art in POD to the self publishing industry. Now, in 2009 you see large publishers considering using print-on-demand to develop "farm team" publishing systems. Some academic publishers do a majority of their publishing in print-on-demand. But it all started with the self-pub houses.
- Improved Print Technology (sort of). Project Ibid intended to use Xerox Docu-tech technology to print the books after they were digitized. When we began in 1999, we also were laughed out of rooms when we told printers we wanted to print and ship one book in 48 hours to a retail customer. The "Big Box" equipment being sold by the Xerox and IBM's of the world was not the way to do it and make money (unless you were those big companies). We never intended to print our own books when we started BookSurge, but we were left with no choice. We stepped in with a totally different approach using equipment that was small, modular and redundant. It wasn't pretty, but it worked. And as the business grew, so did the sophistication of the tools. The systems got prettier and more effective. Now printing one-book-at-a-time is done well by multiple players (Amazon/BookSurge, Ingram, Publidisa, etc.). The world has shrunk for those willing to think differently about how they manage a catalog and disseminate content. Libraries can be leaders in this new era of publishing on multiple fronts.

While working for Amazon in Seattle I was lucky to be involved in some early library POD publishing projects with other pioneers such as Mark Sandler, Maria Bonn, and Terri Geitgy at University of Michigan and Anne Kearney at Cornell. I left BookSurge after integrating the company into Amazon, thinking I would get away from books. No such luck - this is just what I was built to do.

In the fall of 2007 a group of BookSurge co-founders re-grouped to grow a business focused specifically on helping libraries and institutions unlock the commercial potential of print-on-demand and e-book content called BiblioLife. Our mission "Old Books Deserve a New Life" is eerily close to the title of David's article published in 1993. And of course I am now needling David to

bring Project Ibib back to life to help us tackle the myriad of issues related to the world we live in today – a world with millions of digital books and millions more to come.