

## Against the Grain

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# Op Ed -- Notes from Mosier -- PDA: Driving Off the Cliff or, New Wine in Old Bottles

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## PDA: Driving Off the Cliff or, New Wine in Old Bottles

Column Editor: **Scott A. Smith** (Kent State University) <scott.alan.smith@comcast.net>

Before **Katina's** call for this issue's articles crossed my desk I was working on a piece that began by considering Buckeyes — a breed of chicken developed by **Nettie Metcalf** in Warren, Ohio in the nineteenth century. (I'm also told there's a third-rate collegiate sports team by the same name in the area, but I've yet to verify that.) At any rate, we'll get back to the Buckeyes in my next contribution.

This issue is devoted to the topic of patron-driven acquisitions. So, for what's they're worth, here are my thoughts on the subject.

First, "patron-driven" is not a new idea. For many libraries, patron requests have long been a part of the selection and acquisitions process. Moreover, responsible collection development librarians take their communities into account and seek to build solid, well-rounded collections to anticipate and meet the needs of their constituencies.

Some will argue that it is impossible to predict what people will actually request, and that building collections "just in case" is frivolous in today's world of limited budgets. I'll return to the "just in case / just in time" issue shortly.

The current discussions about PDA have evolved from the ability, rendered by technology, of enabling patrons to "discover" potential content that a library has yet to purchase, license, or subscribe to. This in and of itself is all well and good. I have no real argument with the next step, that of allowing patrons to indicate their interest in, and thereby nominating a given item for potential acquisition. Again, all well and good.

I do take issue with the notion, espoused by some, of abdicating all responsibility for selection and allowing the process to devolve completely to those within a given library's community who are active with this technology. To do so violates many things: the rights of those who are either not engaged with the technology or choose not to make use of it, the library's responsibility to ensure some balance in its collections, and the validity of those subjects which may simply not be in vogue at present.

Library budgets are woefully inadequate. There is simply no way most libraries can provide everything their customers want. Some effort must be devoted to assigning priority to what will be purchased.

Moreover, PDA by its nature will favor those formats that readily allow its application. Some might argue that

if usage of eBooks equals or exceeds that of print, perhaps a library's budget is most appropriately spent predominantly on e.

Ah, but here's the rub: not every monographic title is available as an eBook. Most publishers I've talked with about this recently (including **Oxford University Press**, **Cambridge University Press**, the **University of Minnesota Press**, the **University of New Mexico Press**, **Brill**, **Wiley**, **Taylor & Francis**, **Springer**, **Gale/Cengage**, and **Elsevier**, to name but a few) indicate that moving forward they intend to make most books available both as print and e (the most notable exceptions being those titles where permissions, e.g., for illustrations make a digital edition problematic). Moreover, the historical practice of embargoing e-content for some period of time has also largely disappeared; in general print and e are available more or less simultaneously.

However, for the foreseeable future a certain body of the literature is not likely to see the light of day as e. The reasons for this are various, but the fundamental reality is that there is not now, and there will not be for quite some time to come, a complete one-to-one correspondence between print books and eBooks.

This brings me back to "just in time." Technology is also reshaping the way publishers, as producers of a physical product, go about issuing their wares. Print-on-demand already satisfies a notable percentage of the call for print books, and it's a pretty safe bet that percentage will continue to increase as time goes by.

For many publishers the formula these days works like this: the first printing is still produced using offset

presses, simply because the per unit cost is substantially lower than POD. Moreover, although POD quality has improved enormously since the early days of the technology, it's still not equal to what offset can offer. Like many new technologies, POD has gotten cheaper, better, and more reliable. For content that's just text, good enough is probably good enough.

Publishing has historically been a conservative industry; one that embraced change only when forced to do so. This is changing. The old assumptions about print runs, inventory, and distribution channels have all been challenged and

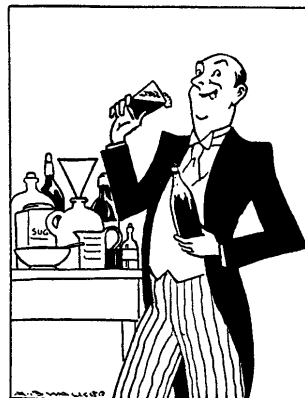
re-written. The idea that a text will be developed but not in fact delivered until someone actually orders it is already with us. For anyone who worries about maintaining an inventory, this is great news.

My concern revolves around the content that is no longer viewed as making commercial sense. Sure, the costs of hosting some data are a

fraction of what's involved with printing, storing, and shipping real books, but the editorial costs are still there. Publishers have to look at everything involved in the cycle.

Some will point out that this process of market de-selection will happen regardless. They're right. But that doesn't mean we're the better for it. To me it heightens the shallow, insubstantial nature of our interaction with so much in today's world.

But back to patron-driven acquisitions: the idea of giving library users another easy and efficient tool to nominate content for acquisition is great. It's also a pretty simple affair. Really, at the end of the day much more ado about this is much ado about — not much. 🐦



### Rumors from page 14

Speaking of the **2011 (31st!) Charleston Conference**, registration opened two days ago and we already have 42 people registered! And the **Vendor Showcase** is open and filling up! Sign up quickly!

The Early Bird gets the view! [www.katina.info/conference](http://www.katina.info/conference)

The **Saga of an acquisitions librarian**. How to find a hard to find item? Such items still exist. One of our library school student interns, **Jessica Farrell**, needed a copy of *Directory of libraries and library professionals in*

*continued on page 51*