

June 2013

From A University Press-Publishers and Consortia

Leila W. Salisbury

University Press of Mississippi, lsalisbury@ihl.state.ms.us

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Salisbury, Leila W. (2013) "From A University Press-Publishers and Consortia," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 25: Iss. 3, Article 27.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6534>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

From A University Press — Publishers and Consortia

Column Editor: **Leila W. Salisbury** (Director, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, MS 39211; Phone: 601-432-6205) <lsalisbury@ihl.state.ms.us>

In my last column, I addressed the confusing and sometimes dizzying array of options for purchasing, licensing, or even briefly renting scholarly content in electronic form. We, both libraries and publishers, find ourselves in this place because we are in the process of navigating significant change in how users would like to access and interact with content. We experiment, each of us, as we try to develop a sense of what users want and what is truly useful to them, and also to begin to gather some data. As the landscape is constantly evolving, in addition to dealing with whatever new model I'm working to get put into place, I also like to speculate a bit about what comes next — and what that may mean for us as publishers.

Now that PDA/DDA seems to be a more accepted part of the library acquisitions portfolio, in the last year or so my thoughts have turned to the issue of consortia. In an era when most of us have to do more with less, the concept of consortial purchase or access makes sense. Consortia existed long before the advent of eBooks, but consortial purchases in print meant that books were being shipped or sent by van to multiple campuses and libraries across a wide geographic area. Libraries saved on purchasing multiple copies, but there are real costs to the processing and transport of the materials. (In the conversation three years ago that turned me around on the concept of short term loan/access, a librarian explained to me the inefficiencies and costs of interlibrary loans.) The eBook, however, changes this game entirely.

With electronic content, there's nothing to transport, nothing to photocopy or scan. The eBook becomes immediately usable in any of the consortia locations (that is, according to the publisher and vendor agreement about the scope of use of the material, but more about that in a moment). It takes us one step closer to the dream of those who champion the vision of one big universal library on a set of servers somewhere (this would be the dream of my brother, network architect for a state flagship university. So far at least, no fights have broken out over the Thanksgiving turkey about this issue) or a large-scale project such as the **DPLA**. For libraries, this appears to be a very good thing, something that allows them to deliver access to more scholarly content to a wider set of patrons.

So why would publishers fear such a development? I would posit that it's largely about the money, or explained more accurately in the context of our goals as university presses, it's about sustainability.

To get some perspective on the issue, I touched base with **Dean Smith** from **UPCC**

and with **Michael Zeoli** from **YBP**. Both said that consortial activity was a growth area (**Zeoli** described it as "intense") for their operations. The general look and terms of such deals were long ago hammered out on the journals and STM side, but for books, it's as if we're starting from scratch again. **Smith** noted that when working in STM, his mantra used to be: "find the widest possible audience for the largest amount of content." Why doesn't this mantra hold for books then? Publishers would say that the discounts being requested as a part of these deals are simply not sustainable.

There seem to be two types of consortial buyers, each with a different definition of what constitutes a successful consortium. There are the cooperative collectors, those who view consortia as an effective and efficient way to deliver content and to build comprehensive collections across their consortia as a whole. Then there are the consortia whose activities are driven by price, most specifically discount. They would like the most content for the least money, like they've walked into a Sam's Club and are loading the cart with value packs of 24-count paper towels.

Though I am not an expert on Sam's Club's business model, my guess is that they can offer low prices because they are dealing in bulk; they sell large enough quantities that the discounts required of the suppliers to keep the prices low are acceptable to both parties. University presses simply don't operate on this model. I'm reminded of the typed index card, yellowed with age, that I inherited on the bulletin board in my office when I began this job five years ago. The quote, attributed to **Chester Kerr**, director of the **Yale University Press**, reads, "We publish the smallest editions at the greatest cost, and on these we place the highest prices, and then try to market them to people who can least afford them. This is madness." (As an amusing side note, **Chester Kerr** retired as director at **Yale** in 1979, so this is indeed proof that everything old is new again, or that we've all had these same problems for at least thirty years.) Madness it may be, but it is how we operate and in good measure at the core of who we are as university presses. We publish quality work for a limited audience, and the financial model simply isn't designed to consistently accommodate large volume at rock-bottom prices. I do not mean for this to sound elitist or indicate that we as publishers don't have the desire to sell what we publish as effectively and widely as possible. Many university presses successfully publish regional or general interest books intended for wider audiences. But for the monographs and the supplemental course texts we publish, the reality is that those are not books likely to be purchased by a general reader, even if the book were stocked in the local Target.



Before publishers dismiss consortial sales out of hand, however, there is another important argument to be made. There are many markets internationally, and also libraries in the U.S., that in the past have not had access to or have not chosen to purchase university press content. These are users to be exposed to our scholarly publications, with the hope that they will find them useful and germane to their work and study. Once these publications are discoverable and discovered, the assumption is that overall use will increase and that a convincing argument can be made for the real (read: higher) value of the content. **Smith** argues that large end-user populations and great quantities of material "is the best combination for driving access, usage, and value long-term." How to solve the accompanying pricing dilemma? **Smith** puts it well when he notes, "You need to start somewhere and build both end-user and library loyalty. You also need to take a long term view in these challenging economic times."

As the proverb goes, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Nervous as many publishers are, and as unsure as they are about what measure of financial return will actually define sustainability, some single steps have begun. **Zeoli** says that nearly all of the consortial deals he's working with for book content are limited to one year and are all classified as pilot programs. In the pilots, there are usually limitations on simultaneous access, sometimes the requirement to purchase print copies, and/or other stipulations that publishers hope will stem the erosion of print sales or at least protect them to some degree from losing additional revenue. I suspect that neither side would say these pilots are ideal, but they are at least a start. The libraries might argue that for the lower price per book, publishers are getting use (though exposure and access) where there was none before. In return, the publishers might say that their content gets higher use in electronic form than print (because of the increased ease of access and navigation) and so the electronic material should carry a higher unit price.

"The devil is in the details of what we do," **Zeoli** says. "Everything is an experiment." **Zeoli** is right about the details. Gone are the days when we (either libraries or publishers) could operate with only the vaguest notion of what our partners do and of the nature of their operations and finances. To even begin to structure an experiment, we each have to have a solid understanding of our partners' end goals, as well as the pain points they experience. As with so many other things in how we conduct our work as libraries and publishers, it is the experiments that will eventually show us what does and doesn't work for us, what provides value (defined many ways), and what ultimately proves unsustainable. The first step may be a moderately frightening one, but without it, there is no journey forward. 🌱