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Editorial: Consonant Actions

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Editorial: Consonant Actions

At its annual Midwinter meeting in January 1999, *Journal of Academic Librarianship* board members discussed the ramifications of Elsevier's recent acquisition of the title. The thesis of this resulting editorial is that academic librarians who talk to their faculties about transforming their scholarly communications by moving away from commercial publishers cannot concurrently serve on an Elsevier-controlled journal board. Only consonant discussions and actions can undergird the integrity and moral force needed to be effective in the academy. The rationale of those leaving the board involves a discussion of journal microenvironment, the journal macroenvironment, the contribution to librarianship, the balance between responsibilities to campus and the profession, and the endgame. *JAL* readers are encouraged to communicate their reactions to gstclair@andrew.cmu.edu. These comments will be posted on the home page at www.suffolk.edu/admin/sawlib/jal/jalhome.htm.

JOURNAL MICROENVIRONMENT

Tony Seward and Barbara Barrett, representing Elsevier, were attentive to questions about the future pricing of *JAL* itself. They predicted that the price for the journal would not rise dramatically. *JAL* entered the market in 1977 priced at \$14 for individuals and \$15 for institutions; prices rose gradually to \$29 for individuals and \$65 for institutions until 1993 when Morningside Press sold the title. In 1994, JAI Press priced the journal at \$39 for individuals and \$80 for institutions. From 1997 through September 1998, prices were \$60 for individuals and \$160 for institutions. In November 1998, prices rose to \$75 and \$195 respectively. The latest increase, 22% and 25%, the largest in the journal's history, occurred during a time period when JAI Press still belonged to the Johnsons who were negotiating the sale to Elsevier.

At the board meeting, Seward and Barrett made a strong commitment to the continuing quality of the journal and proposed solutions for problems with late publication of issues. Production of the journal is likely to improve in timeliness and in quality. Whether Elsevier ownership will have an ef-

fect, either positive or negative, on the quality of submissions cannot yet be assessed.

JOURNAL MACROENVIRONMENT

While the price of *JAL* itself was certainly a concern, board members had more pervasive issues with the new owners. Academic libraries are a third party payer in the scholarly communications system. Teaching faculty produce scholarly content in their disciplines and consume it, but the bills, which have been inflating at 12% a year for longer than a decade, are paid by the library. In the inevitable environment of journal cut after journal cut, librarians are actively discussing scholarly communications issues, such as intellectual property management, choice of publishers, and decoupling certification from print publication, with the campus community. Librarians bring forward resolutions on university retention of intellectual property to faculty senates, librarians watch as the cost of science journals shapes college curriculums, and librarians lament the demise of the humanities monographs which can no longer be purchased because budgets are suborned by science serial price increases.

For librarians who are highly visible on campus around these issues to be working with Elsevier poses a moral and professional conundrum. Among commercial publishers, Elsevier has been one of the most aggressive in steeply increasing its prices to libraries. Sue Martin, Director of Libraries at Georgetown University, urged other board members who are actively engaged in such initiatives to consider walking the walk. As board members discussed what Elsevier action would make continuing on the board possible, Martin suggested that rolling back prices on all journals would resolve her moral dilemma. That does not appear to be forthcoming.

CONTRIBUTION

Within the expanding journal environment, the *JAL* enterprise has been a compelling one. The journal, now celebrating its 25th year, has contributed positively to the quality of librarians and libraries. Studies of the relative esteem in

which various publications are held rank it first or second among all journals in the field. Anecdotal evidence indicates that readers like the high quality of the articles, the engaging nature of the columns, the quick guide to the literature, the editorial comments, and the overall focus on practical problems.

Serving on the *JAL* board gives members the opportunity to shape the growth of the discipline. By selecting certain topics and themes rather than others, the board shapes the future of the field. The board actively recruits material for publication in the *Journal* and the editors often commission works on compelling topics. Board members who are considering leaving will miss participating in this enterprise, sharing ideas with each other, and seeing themselves as part of the noble and historic print enterprise. For the editor, it will be the end of nine years as the shaper of and voice for progressive scholarship in librarianship—nine years of focusing on change issues necessary to ensure a bold future.

BALANCE

In spite of these many contributions to librarianship, board members also serve as librarians on our campuses; their loyalties are torn. Faculty and administrators trust librarians more than they trust computer centers, scholarly societies, bibliographic utilities, and commercial vendors to preserve the heritage of the past. Librarians as a group have a reputation for fairness, reliability, and truth. Beyond that image, many have traversed campus talking with department after department about their responsibility to keep communications in their disciplines affordable and thus available for students and faculty. Board member Nick Burckel noted that as a matter of simple equity and fairness librarians need to follow their own advice. Working for Elsevier will blemish both our professional image and our individual reputations.

ENDGAME

Larry Hardesty wished that those board members who had strong reservations about the change in ownership had concluded their discussion and registered their decision to leave at the Midwinter board meeting. He thought that would send a clearer and more powerful message to campus constituents. The device of this editorial with its opportunity for others in the profession to contemplate the moral dilemma and comment on it allows for a time of quiet reflection, individual weighing of divided loyalties between the profession and the campus, and consultation among ourselves via a listserv. It also allows the general editor, Peter Herson, time to find a replacement for the editor, some column editors, and several board members. Karyle Butcher noted that staying through 1999 to see through the publication of articles already selected by the board seemed to be a reasonable and accept-

able compromise. It is orderly and deliberate in line with the reputation for reliability.

CONCLUSION

In my January editorial, I noted that for librarians, change was certain. A new publisher, a new editor, and new editorial board members will create a different journal in the same way that the move from Morningside's ownership and Martell's editorship to JAI Press and Herson/St. Clair did. The JAI Press epoch is ended. The signators below commit to other enterprises—renewed efforts on campus to aide scholars in their discipline communications, other venues for shaping librarianship as a profession, and the certain knowledge that actions were consonant with words.—**Gloriana St. Clair**

Don L. Bosseau
Nicholas C. Burckel
Karyle Sue Butcher
Deborah Dancik
Ronald F. Dow
Robert E. Dugan
Larry Hardesty
Eddy Hogan
Charles B. Lowry
Charles Martell
Susan K. Martin
Sarah M. Pritchard
Helen H. Spalding
Jack Sulzer

The editor wishes to thank Stephen Lehmann whose editing of her work over the last five years has regularly enhanced its quality.

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PUBLISHER'S COMMENT

Elsevier Science notes, with regret, the decision by Gloriana St. Clair and some members of the editorial board of the *Journal of Academic Librarianship* to leave their positions this year. We want to thank them for their work on the journal.

With the continued support of existing and new members of the board, we expect the journal to maintain the same high level of quality and relevance that has characterized it in the past. As is evident from the Editorial and from the Visions column in this issue, editorial independence has not been compromised by the change in ownership. We only wish that those members of the board who resigned before actually working with us would have stayed and continued to provide their comments to us, as part of a joint effort to improve the scholarly communication process.