"The fighting varsity"—"hail, Purdue!!" and all you other libraries out there!

by Doris Small Helfer
Sciences Librarian
Library, California State University, Northridge

The December 29, 1997 New York Times carried a story near and dear to my heart and those of most academic librarians these days. On December 1, 1997 a meeting occurred between Purdue University faculty and Russell White, President of Elsevier Science Inc., a division of Elsevier Wolters Kluwer, plc. At this meeting Mr. White told the faculty at Purdue that they could lock in the prices on 350 online publications, which now supplement the company’s entire list of 1,200 scientific and technical journals, at an annual increase of only 9.5 percent per year, but only if they agreed to sign-up for three more years. Purdue declined Elsevier’s generous offer.

I guess Purdue finally reached a financial breaking point, a point where they felt unwilling and unable to absorb anything close to those cost increases, especially when the faculty considered the quality of what they would get as not worth the money. Even before White’s visit, Purdue, which still spends more than $1 million a year on Elsevier journals, had canceled 88 of the 803 titles it once received. Among those axed were Brain Research at a hefty annual subscription rate of $14,919, Mutation Research at a paltry $7,378, and Tetrahedron With Tetrahedron: Asymmetry for only $8,506 per annum.

When the cost of a journal reaches such heights, people begin looking very hard at the quality of what they get for that money. Professor Marc Loudon, a professor of medicinal chemistry at Purdue who attended the meeting, was quoted in The New York Times article as saying Elsevier journals tend to be “second- and third-tier. None are in the top tier in chemistry, biology and biochemistry, the fields I read in. If we lose Elsevier journals in those fields, we will be OK. Why do we want to buy garbage at a 9.5 percent price increase?” he asked. Russell White of Elsevier Science, also quoted in the same article, countered, “We have some outstanding brand names with some really good articles of interest to scientists and researchers throughout the world.”

The Problem

Universities and research libraries buy about 95 percent of Elsevier’s science journals and have accepted in the past price increases on subscriptions that have averaged in the double-digit range for years. Renewal rates for their subscriptions run at a rate well above 90 percent. Professors strive to enhance knowledge in their fields and to further their own careers in a universe where “publish or perish” has been the rule for a long time. The competition is so great that Reed demands, and gets, copyrights to the articles from the authors, and in most cases pays them NOTHING. Needing publication in prestigious publications to win tenure, and to add the reflected glory of that prestige to their university’s reputation, professors naturally want the journals in which they publish carried in their university library.

Nevertheless, librarians have been screaming for a long time that they can no longer afford those periodicals in their libraries, especially at constantly increasing prices. Serial subscriptions have increased far beyond any cost of inflation or fluctuations in the currency markets. According to an e-mail message Emily Mobley, Dean of Libraries at Purdue, sent to the Directors of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), what triggered the Purdue University meeting was a report from a faculty committee at Purdue recommending that university administrators at the highest levels should meet with like representatives from the publishing industry to express the University’s concern about continually escalating serials prices and the effect such actions were having on scholarly communications.

Purdue has had an ad hoc committee on serials decisions, chaired by the Dean of Libraries, for some time. A year ago, that committee embarked on a serials review project designed to cut a mandated $600,000 from serials expenses. The committee targeted the more expensive publishers. That policy brought Elsevier into their sights. Purdue chose to concentrate on Elsevier, because 27 percent of the total serial dollars spent in the last fiscal year went to Elsevier, and because, over the last six years, Elsevier serial costs at Purdue have increased by 151 percent. In one of Purdue’s departmental

(continued on page 54)
libraries. Elsevier publications constitute a little over 10 percent of the library's periodical titles, but eat up one-third of the library's serials budget.

The Purdue faculty wanted to make the following points for Elsevier's consideration:
1) The symbiotic relationship faculty had with commercial publishers is breaking down, because of the pricing policies of publishers.
2) Commercial publishers do not produce the content, and the content producers (professors) can choose to go elsewhere to be published.
3) Access to more titles online is not that important, because, if it were, they would have subscribed to the print version in the first place.
4) Purdue faculty found it critical that electronic serials be linked at the article level to established indexing sources, particularly Current Contents, Web of Science, INSPEC, Compendex, Medline, and Biological Abstracts, and considered a promised index to Elsevier-only publications, under development, as unimportant and a waste of resources.
5) The faculty felt Elsevier's arguments about the currency exchange issue between the dollar and guilder was "a crock." One Purdue professor studied the value of the guilder for the past seven years, noting the years there should have been a "negative increase," warranting a cost reduction that never happened.
6) Prices were unnecessarily high. A professor who edits a society journal wondered why a similar journal covering the same discipline with a similar number of annual pages would cost four time more when published by Elsevier, than when published by his society.
7) To guarantee Elsevier a 9.5 percent annual price increase means cuts would have to take place elsewhere, as that rate exceeds general inflation, the amount the University would likely receive from the state.
8) When the library cut serials, they recommended targeting Elsevier titles first and protecting the more cost-effective publications from scholarly/scientific society publishers.

Throughout the country colleges and universities have had to look long and hard at where to make severe cut backs to their periodical subscriptions. The combination of the recession in the early 1990s, which left many states and public and private universities in dire financial straits, and the whole movement to less government has dried up the amount of money available to public academic institutions and their libraries, at a time when online access fees and hardcopy subscriptions continue to soar. Even private universities felt the squeeze to keep themselves competitive with the public institutions.

The Wrong Solution

The average cost for a science and technology periodical has increased 50 percent since 1992. Electronic publications frequently cost quite a bit more than hard copies. The larger the price increases, the more libraries look for places to make cuts, with expensive journals as the natural targets. After all, the pain of cutting one $14,000-plus journal hurts far less than the pain of cutting 70 journals priced at $200 a year. Unfortunately, however, as lots of libraries began to look at the same pricey journals and as circulation went down, the price increases continued as publishers sought ways to keep their revenues up with declining circulation.

Personally, I think publishers such as Elsevier and Academic Press came up with electronic package plans as another way to ensure their weaker, smaller circulation publications would continue to generate revenue even with small demand. They could also turn to libraries, such as Purdue's, and point to the increased access the electronic packages offered to titles the library didn't currently have (or want or need). What a great deal!! All these additional journals for just a little bit more than you pay already, Purdue's point is well taken that if they needed them, they would already have subscribed to them in hard copy.

Also, by agreeing to take a publisher's entire package (no matter what the deal), libraries give up something they have long held in the utmost importance, the right to determine and buy what they think their patrons need. With limited budgets, this means that taking a package deal from one publisher imposes cuts on other publishers' publications, cuts not driven by quality or needs assessments. And, of course, that is exactly what Elsevier and other publishers want. for you to buy all their publications and none of their competitors. We wouldn't stand for it for a second in hardcopy. Why are we standing for it in the electronic versions, I wonder? Not to imply we all are, but some are buying these packages. I would plead with libraries out there not to do it, no matter how convenient it may initially appear. It's not in your interest or your customers' best interest to do so.

In the California State University (CSU) system where I work, the entire consortium has turned to aggregators and publishers and said, "This is what we want. What will you charge us for the electronic version of these publications, most of which are currently owned by the vast majority of the 23 CSU campuses?" It may not be a perfect approach, but it's a much more proactive one, and one that does not allow libraries to abrogate their responsibility for collection development.

No More

Publishers like Elsevier have gotten away with price increases because we've let them. We vote with our budgets, and it's past time to let those publishers know that their prices are way out of line, and out of the academic world's range of affordability. There are true dangers to such publishers, as more and more librarians talk with their faculty. Faculty have a choice; they can send their articles to more cost-effective, and just as prestigious, publications. But there is another danger the Purdue professors did not press. After The New York Times' article and Emily Mobley's e-mail message to ARL directors, Professor Rob Kirby of the Mathematics Department at the University of California Berkeley wrote a letter to Mr. White, President of
Elsevier Science, and Mr. Nigel Stapleton, co-deputy chief executive of Elsevier Wolters Kluwer, in which he suggested that because of the length of time it takes to publish an article in mathematics, someone should establish a system of preprint servers to facilitate electronic access in mathematics. This has already begun to happen. Such a system allows quicker and more efficient access to papers and easier distribution to any interested reader. In his letter, Kirby also states, “It is still vitally important, in my opinion, that we mathematicians retain our tradition of having papers refereed and accepted (or rejected) by journals... This should continue and can be done electronically.”

True to his mathematician’s instincts, Professor Kirby quantified the cost per page of mathematics journals and compared Elsevier’s and their competitors’ price-per-page, finding them seriously overpriced. For example, the *Annals of Mathematics* from Princeton University Press and the *Journal of the American Mathematical Society* both cost 15 cents per page, while *Inventiones Mathematicae* from Springer Verlag costs $1.10 per page. Using the costs of the journals in his university library, Kirby calculated that the average cost per page for Elsevier publications was 73 cents, ranging from a high of $1.35 per page to $1.47 cents per page. Springer costs averaged 82 cents. Academic Press 40 cents per page, and Wolters Kluwer (with whom Elsevier merged), 67 cents per page. Most importantly, Kirby stated that he and his colleagues intended to send their articles to more cost-effective competitors and may no longer insist that their libraries buy Elsevier journals, unless they become more cost-effective. He suggested Elsevier cut their subscription prices in half or give their journals to academic editors to run as a non-profit.

Kirby also mentioned a new electronic journal entitled Geometry and Topology based at the University of Warwick [http://www.maths.warwick.ac.uk/gt/](http://www.maths.warwick.ac.uk/gt/) as an example of the new technological options for authors. The electronic journal is entirely free for now and the foreseeable future.

Professor Kirby also warned Elsevier that the restrictive copyright controls they put on their authors, not allowing them to put their papers on preprint servers, for example, could also cause scholars to publish elsewhere. He wonders what value the commercial publisher provides, when mathematicians write and TEX [advanced mathematically oriented document processing program] their own papers, referee and edit the journals, and get paid by universities. They then turn over the papers — and the copyright — to publishers who add relatively little value in producing the paper volume from their TEX files, and then turn around and sell the journals to the university libraries, at mostly exorbitant prices.

Looks like libraries, universities, and faculty are finally up in arms and not going to take it anymore. The New York Times’ article wondered if the Purdue event would serve as a mere blip in the continuing demand, but 1 and many academics think this could become the tip of the iceberg for commercial publishers riding in first-class cabins on the Titanic. Major changes will take place over the course of the next couple of years, and publishers who don’t realize it could soon find themselves without customers for those products.

By the way, according to Elsevier’s *Science Information* (Number 8, Fall 1997), the modern Elsevier publishing company began in 1880 when a Rotterdam bookseller, Jacobus George Robbers (1838-1925), founded a new publishing company using the Elsevier name. Hmm. Wonder why Robbers didn’t use his own name?