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**MID-YEAR REPORT: THE STATE OF AUTHORING**

John Vivian's periodic wrapups of the news for academic authors has been called the most valuable service that any authoring organization can offer its members. Vivian, himself an academic author, is the founder of the Society of Academic Authors. He edits the SA2 news site. His academic home is Winona State University in Minnesota.



[JOHN VIVAN](#)

TOP STORIES

STORY NO. 1

**COLLEGE FREE FALL**

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Everybody should have seen it coming -- a sudden plummet in U.S. college textbook sales. Nobody did. Realization of a disaster at hand came as textbooks shipped to bookstores on consignment, the usual practice, were returned unsold in unprecedented numbers after the Fall 2003 semester. The drop was so dramatic that traditional reporting mechanisms, like the Association of American Publishers monthly sales report, couldn't accurately illustrate what happened. For February, for example, AAP reported sales were off 87.6 percent after returns had been subtracted from shipments. That meant, gross sales were down almost half from a year earlier. AAP didn't even try to make year-to-date comparison for February. It got worse, March was 820 percent off from a year earlier. That's right -- 820 percent, no dropped decimal -- a decline to less than one-ninth of a year earlier. What happened? The number of students trying to get through courses without textbooks, which had been growing over the years, suddenly shot upward. Why? Marketing people use the term *price resistance*. Also, price sensitivity took ever stronger hold of adopters. The perennial bane of authors and publishers, the used book trade, was a factor. So too was a growing array of no-cost information sources on the web. For authors, the shock will hit in September, when publishers subtract the massive number of

returned book from royalties that were paid in March on the strong Fall 2003 shipments.

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STORY NO. 2

## **DISCOUNT E-TEXTBOOKS**

Reeling from the bottom falling out of sales, Pearson Education scrambled to reinvent the traditional textbook marketing infrastructure. The company, the largest U.S. textbook publisher, announced that 300 titles would be available online at half price in September 2004. Pearson plans to bypass campus bookstores and, in effect, lease access to textbook to students for a limited period. The move is designed not only to address price sensitivity problems but also to cut used book trafficking. Used books typically sell about half price. Pearson didn't have time to add complex, art-laden books to its e-list. Nor did the company have the budget to fund costlier photo rights for web use. But Pearson promised to expand quickly beyond the first 300 titles. Thomson and McGraw, two other major publishers, immediately went into high gear to prepare their own e-products for fall classes. The shock of what had happened was no more evident than in a March statement by McGraw chief Terry McGraw, before it was clear a disaster was at hand, that he foresaw only limited possibilities for e-textbooks. In less than two months, in a turnaround announcement, McGraw announced that its Primis coursepack program was being transformed into a direct-to-student e-sales mechanism.

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STORY NO. 3

## **CALIFORNIA PRICING REPORT**

The heat got turned up against college textbook publishers by the California Public Interest Research Group, which compiled

all the old, tired arguments about price gouging in an omnibus document that, despite lots of flaws, did publishers no good. Nor authors either. State legislators, eager for a scapegoat over rising college costs in general, glommed on to the CalPIRG recommendations. Now legislation is drafted to require publishers to tell adopters the price of textbooks, as if prices had ever been a secret. There also are initiatives to discourage bundling, a demagogic pickup on the PIRG assertion that bundling CD-ROMs and other enhancements to textbook packages adds no value, just cost. The giant publisher Thomson erred in defending its practices when students used the CalPIRG assertions to protest textbook pricing. Nobody believed the publisher -- not the students, not the legislators. CalPIRG had already settled the issue with all the publicity attendant to its report, provocatively titled *Ripoff 101*. It was partly in response to the CalPRG reoprt that Thomson, Pearson and McGraw have moved swiftly to create discount products in digital form for rent over the web.

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STORY NO. 4

## **EL-HI'S BUSH BOOST**

All the dollars that educational publishers soent lobbying for the No Child Left Behind law, the centerpiece of President George W. Bush's education program, is paying off manifold. To demonstrate they're worth continued public funding, school districts are investing heavily in standardized testing -- and the big el-hi publishers, and many smaller ones, have expanded their test product lines to meet the demand. The sales of standardized tests grew 17.1 percent this year to \$2.1 billion and are projected to grow 10.4 percent a year through 2008 -- more than triple the growth of the U.S. book industry pverfall. The growth in sales of tests has offset losses in book sales that resulted from tighter school district budgets.

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STORY NO. 5

## UNIVERSITY PRESS SLIPPAGE

More university presses in the United States have bit the dust, unable to meet profit expectations imposed on them in recent years. In the process of shutting down are Northeastern University Press and University of Idaho Press. Both would have been heralded as outstanding successes in earlier times when universities valued having an in-house scholarly publishing outlet and subsidized them. Major downsizing continues at the University of California Press. Rumbling of imminent budget-driven changes continue at the University of Georgia. Are there alternate models? Merging university presses has been discussed, as have shared marketing, distribution and other functions. There also is the option of selling, as occurred in 2000 at Iowa State University. The British academic publisher Blackwell, which bought Iowa State, has expanded the list and claims average annual sales growth of about 7 percent. In general, though, university press sales continue their decline -- off 17.2 percent for soft-cover titles through April this year and 5.4 percent for hard.

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STORY NO. 6

## PERMISSIONS SOARING

Textbook publishers are becoming less willing to pick up permissions fees for quoted material, photographs and art. The goal: Transfer the costs to authors in cases in which authors already aren't responsible for the fees. Two Seattle companies, both sidelines of moneyed founders, the Bill Gates-owned Corbis agency and Getty-owned Getty Images, are amassing assets from traditional agencies and expanding their own collections. Not every Corbis photo costs \$42,000 to use, but that's the rate for one of John F. Kennedy Jr. One bug-eyed tree frog image generates as much as \$100,000 a year for Getty. The newspaper *USA Today*, although once was flattered to have a front page reproduced in a current-affairs textbook, now wants \$500 minimum. "Our brand name is worth it," a spokesperson

explained. Textbook publishers, seeing even higher permissions fees in the tea leaves, have approached some authors with contract revisions to have the authors pick up all permissions fees.

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STORY NO. 7

## **PRINT-ON-DEMAND**

For better or worse, the InstaBook is here. A Ridgewood, New Jersey, bookstore installed the first print-on-demand machine in a retail setting to call up digital source material from remote sites on print out a book for customers on the spot. "If you'll kindly wait 10 minutes, dear customer," the clerk says as he pushes keys to start the process. What's a marvel to watch may be a nightmare for textbook authors, whose works with traditional publishers can be dissected and assembled into coursepack-like collages more efficiently than ever. Among publishers with their own POD projects are Pearson Education and MIT Press. McGraw has a headstart on POD-ready content with its Primis database that goes back more than 10 years but which only now may start realizing its potential. There is peril, too, for authors who are with a traditional publisher and decide to regain rights to a book. Most existing contracts allow a publisher to keep the rights as long as a single book is in the warehouse, which, although not tested in the courts, could be argued to include a single master digital copy held for one-at-a-time POD publication. The good news is for self-publishing authors who don't even need a printer. The bookstore will do it one at a time, POD, on a customer-by-customer basis.

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STORY NO. 8

## **JOURNAL PRICING**

Soaring prices for academic journals are meeting new

resistance from tough university library negotiators. Enough's enough, the University of California told journal mega-publisher Elsevier. And Elsevier bent, agreeing to provide 3.6 million full-text articles and 59 million abstracts to the California Digital Library, which services all University of California campuses. The contract: \$7.3 million to start with inflation-adjusted increases for five years. The deal was an 8.7 percent pare-down from the current contract, although some juggling on titles in the package muddies a precise apples-to-apples comparison. Meanwhile, objections to journal pricing is taking firmer form. Two University of California at San Francisco scientists have organized a boycott of six molecular-biology journals from Elsevier. Also, Nobel laureate Harold Varmus continues to work on his organization, the Public Library of Science, that puts research literature on the web free to readers. The Public Library of Science is among several open-access publishers distribute their journals free on the Internet with a charge to authors that generally is picked up by their home institutions or in funds from grants the financed the research.

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STORY NO. 9

## **ELSEVIER EASILY BULLIED**

In a sorry demonstration of the adage, "money talks," journal publisher Elsevier Science bowed to the threat of a lawsuit from computer manufacturer IBM if a research article were published on working conditions at its plants. Elsevier scuttled the article rather than risk litigation, even though the article had passed peer-review muster for a special issue of its *Clinics in Occupational and Environmental Medicine*. Elsevier got unwanted publicity for caving in when the authors of the article, Richard Clapp and Rebecca Johnson, and the editor of the special issue, Joseph LaDou, expressed outrage at heavy-handed, self-serving industry interference with the exchange of information and ideas among academic scientists in their scholarly journals. The authors of other article in the special issue all withdrew their work in a boycott. What was the basis

of IBM's threat? The company claimed it hadn't authorized the release data on cancer rates at its semiconductor factories, which was the basis for the article -- even though the data were in court documents available to the public. Also, IBM said the authors' analysis of the data was flawed. After Elsevier's decision to cancel the article, the publisher sidestepped the cowardice issue by saying the article constituted original research and that *Clinics in Occupational and Environmental Medicine* only carries summaries of original research that's already appeared elsewhere. Bottom line: At Elsevier, sad to say, the bottom line trumps wide and open scientific inquiry.

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STORY NO. 10

## **PATRIOT ACT**

Bookstore operators are reallying their customers against provisions of the anti-terrorism Patriot Act that threaten the civil liberties of their customers. The American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression presented 120,000 signatures to leaders of a Congressional campaign to tone down the post-9/11 law. The petition targets Section 215 of the Patriot Act, which allows FBI and other government agents to walk into a bookstore or library and take patron records without a judge's order. The provision, an overreaction in the post-9/11 hysteria, was intended to help agents identify who is reading material that might be of value to terrorists and then go after them. Librarians also are objecting to the provision. The issue has become part of the 2004 presidential campaign. President George Bush, with Attorney General John Ashcroft as his poiint man, wants the Patriot Act re-authorized as is. Senator Richard Durbin, an Illinois Democrat, is leading in a Senate fight to amend.

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**OTHER NOTABLE NEWS**

## DEATHS

**Frank Silverman**, 70, who tirelessly worked at nurturing aspiring authors into careers in text and professional authoring. He died of cancer within weeks of publication of his latest book, *Self-Publishing Textbooks and Instructional Materials*.

**John Toland**, 91, widely read historian on a range of World War II subjects. He held a Pulitzer Prize. Death was due to pneumonia.

**Ida Moretti Flynn**, 62, co-author with Ann McIver McHoes of the college textbook *Understanding Operating Systems*, in its third edition. She was associate editor for Macmillan's four-volume *Computer Sciences* for high school students. She died of cancer.

**Stella Bernice Anderson**, 98, retired associate editor of the journal *Industrial and Engineering Chemistry*.

## ILLNESS

**Peter Jovanovich**, chief executive at Pearson Education, underwent successful surgery for a progressive lung disease. He was on leave for six months, returning part time in June.

## MERGERS AND ACQUISITIONS

None of the major publishers are for sale and they're too big for anybody to easily come up with the cash to buy. Many successful startups, though, have been in play.

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