



Issues in Vendor Library Relations — Hype

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Hype and pornography have a lot in common. Most people you'd ask wouldn't have much good to say about either one, but both surround us, so there must be people who don't object. Both attract, and both repel. Both are big business. And both are hard to define. "I know it when I see it," **Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's** famous words about pornography, in a case about a French film in Ohio, would have worked as well if the justices had been attempting to define the limits of hype.

He knew it when he saw it in 1964, the date of the Court's opinion. Would **Stewart**, who died in 1985, have been so certain if he were writing in 2002? Maybe he'd have said exactly the same thing; but chances are some part of the "it" he knew he could spot in 1964, he'd today let pass as entertainment, or commerce, or art. Boundaries changed, and **Stewart** would have changed with them.

The word was not in circulation in 1964, but we were beginning to learn about the practice of hype. **Beatlemania** broke out. **Andy Warhol** had recently painted **Marilyn Monroe**. **Cassius Clay** boasted he'd beat **Sonny Liston** for the heavyweight title, and did. These were all surprises, notable because they were such departures from what anyone had seen before. They stuck out, marvelous individual efforts each one. Hype had not as yet been commodified, professionalized, and modularized, as today, when hype is landscape, like muzak, one track impossible to recall the instant the next has begun. Today, personal projects in boastfulness or excess would hardly weigh up on the scale as hype at all. Our hype is institutionalized exaggeration, corporate work, planned and sustained, mapped out with monastic discipline and military precision.

The library community was surprised a few years ago to find itself the target of a serious and custom-made operation in hype. This had not happened before. When compared with many other walks of life, the stakes are modest in the library world. No one had previously seen a profit in the considerable effort and expense of a classy hype campaign aimed at libraries. Not, that is, before 1999 and the launch of **netLibrary**.

NetLibrary had \$120 million from investors, **netLibrary** had eBooks, and

netLibrary had the idea that they could create and then lock up the entire market for a product defined by them. And at the top of the dot.com boom, why not? Their black and red logo, which featured a half-circle, the **netLibrary** name, and an open book enclosing the letter "e," was soon as easy to summon to mind as the Golden Arches. They went in no time from eight employees housed in modest offices, to over three hundred, who enjoyed their own **Boulder, Colorado** "campus." **NetLibrary** speakers were on the program of every library conference, wearing suits more expensive than anyone else's. Their brochures were the glossiest too. Their best contacts received flowers. "Generous" hardly does justice to the handout of **netLibrary** bags, pins, buttons, plaques, and other giveaways, which were everywhere.

An advertising campaign in the library press featured multi-page spreads in black-and-white and subdued color, telling stories of ordinary people blessed by eBooks. The ads obviously came out of a professional agency and were not the homemade "when's the deadline?" work of an in-house sales and marketing department with too much else to do. Other ads were not meant for librarians. Some were directly aimed at students, whom **netLibrary** wagered would step up and ask, "Where's the eBooks?" on their own campus. **NetLibrary** conducted the press like a string quartet. *The New York Times* wrote up **netLibrary**. Everybody did. Without a press release in hand to announce that **netLibrary** had partnered with your company, or if a publisher signed up some of your books, or if a library contracted with you or your consortium, you knew you were nowhere. They were the biggest dealmakers we'd ever seen.

Then, something happened. Or rather nothing happened, or not enough. Print books held their ground, since it turned out there was no reader clamor for eBooks. Press releases continued anyway, for noticeably longer than the supply lasted for **netLibrary** pins and buttons, which became scarce. Bags too became hard to find. Then, **netLibrary** skipped some conferences. After that, the ads disappeared. The supply of hype, like the giveaways, ran out.

Which put **netLibrary** back in the press, once it was clear that cash was running out too. "**NetLibrary** on the Ropes," was a representative headline in one trade journal, whose lead paragraph had news about layoffs, salary cuts, and investor losses. Next were stories about bounced royalty checks to

university presses, and serious talks with a potential buyer. The plot climaxed when **netLibrary** was "rescued from oblivion," as one story put it, by **OCLC**, who was the serious-talking buyer. By then, **Time-Warner** had closed down its **iPublish.com**, **MightyWords.com** had folded, **Reciprocal** had gone under, **Adobe** had announced layoffs, and **Questia** had too; five among the eBook "players" all trimming sails like heavy storm-tossed frigates, in tight formation.

"A lot of people — and I was one of those people — made a lot of predictions that were baloney," an official of **Palm Digital Media** remarked to *Publisher's Weekly*. Industry spokespeople all but stood in line to deliver humble statements. "We're in this for the long term," remarked the director of eBooks merchandising at **Barnes & Noble**. Attendees at a downsized e-book conference, reported *PW*, agreed now that the hype was past, "the real work is getting done." **Simon & Schuster's** president said, "eBooks are right where they should be." **NetLibrary** broadcast a listserv message to say, "We remain deeply grateful to all of our customers, publishers, partners and friends for your notes, calls, and continuing expressions of encouragement and support."

When the mighty fall, encouragement and support rarely are the only feelings expressed. Many bystanders enjoyed the show, and with Goliath already on the turf, Davids everywhere loaded up their slingshots. At a certain point, it was suddenly natural to talk dismissively about eBooks, to say they "weren't ready," to refer to the printed book as an unsurpassed technology platform, and to roll the eyes at the very mention of **netLibrary**. "What? You mean the people in marketing were wrong?" was one facetious listserv header for a posting on eBooks. "What a shock, marketing people over hyping something."

But it hadn't been only the marketing people on this one. Anybody with anything to do with eBooks, it had seemed, briefly, was fully credentialed to offer forecasts at any time and in any medium on the future of the book (none too rosy, in some of them, for the print variety), on reading, education, publishing, scholarship, libraries. The virtual podium got awfully crowded. **NetLibrary** was hardly out there alone.

Should **netLibrary** have done it differently? Could they have promoted their eBooks patiently and quietly, getting to know

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the market with shoe leather and old-fashioned sales calls, with business cards left on desks, mornings of phone calls, lunch with top prospects? "We think our eBooks might interest you," the **netLibrary** representative suggests to the librarian, as a waitress departs with order in hand. Then the next call, then write up the day's reports at night, then another day just like it tomorrow.

Their investors must wish that **netLibrary** had done it mostly that way. Which of the rest of us, though, would really have preferred for **netLibrary** to build up the business like some beloved mom-and-pop outfit? Universities, after all, are hardly innocents when it comes to hype. Who didn't enjoy the show? Who wasn't flattered

"If you enter the ring with hype, you'd better win." — Muhammad Ali

to have such a good ticket for a major production in hype like **netLibrary** staged? Who didn't feel they were witnessing something big, were even a part of it? Who doesn't think **netLibrary** gave it a good go?

And who wasn't half scared to death, for a little while, that the future had come and gone, and pitilessly had left the slow sitting by, caretakers of dusty and undisturbed

shelves of printed books? All the hype had one sure effect: nobody wanted to be that. The hype threw a spotlight and cast an interrogation lamp too. What was your library doing? Lots of libraries took up with **netLibrary** and bought some eBooks. They learned in a hurry — this was not a distance education opportunity — and figured out how to use them, how to catalog them, how to promote them, how to integrate them into everything else the library was doing. There were some real successes.

Librarians learned a lot about eBooks. Some things they learned were, that there weren't very many of them, that the use model was restrictive, that they were not a bargain, that there were preservation questions, and above all that their patrons' degree of urgency about the

need for eBooks was well below that of people in the industry. The hype had been a good teacher.

Should **netLibrary** have done it differently? Should **Clay** have been polite to **Liston**? That would have disappointed everyone, probably even **Liston**. But **Muhammad Ali** always knew something that **netLibrary** now knows too: If you enter the ring with hype, you'd better win. 🌳

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