

# Desperately Seeking Website

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*I had the pleasure of talking with Dr. Morna Conway, President of The Conway Group, about the impact of the online environment on publishers and librarians alike. I've asked her permission to share the details with you as well. As always, your comments are welcome on this and any other issue you'd like to see discussed in this column. —AW*

**Amber:** *How do you think the communication has changed between librarians and publishers?*

**Morna:** I started **The Conway Group** 26 years ago and my client base has consisted of non-profit association publishers since that time. However, I think any and all publishers realize now that they need to communicate with librarians much more than was necessary at one time. After WWII, many STM journals were started. As significantly more money became available to fund research, publishers thrived and libraries built up their journal collections. In the early 1970s, you started an STM journal and libraries would usually take it. The proliferation of journals continued, and library budgets grew along with them for several years.

Beginning with the **Reagan** era, university budgets, including library budgets, came under the gun. Large publishers increased subscription rates far above inflation and libraries had no choice but to cancel subscriptions. As a result, publishers increased subscription prices even more, feeding a cycle of inflationary price increases and stepped up cancellations. In the last several years, publishers have realized that librarians have sufficient clout to cancel subscriptions if price increases and usage do not warrant continuing a title. Since 1995, with the advent of the Web, publishers have turned their attention to the dissemination of electronic journals, with print as the archival form. Communication with librarians has improved, driven by the need to talk about Web-based journals, library budgets, etc. This need for dialog has resulted in such forums as the **Charleston Conference** and the publishers' use of library advisory groups like the **National Academy of Sciences' Librarian Advisory Group**, which I have run for the last six years.

**Amber:** *With the consortia effort in full swing, how should this affect the manner in which publishers relate to the institutional customer?*

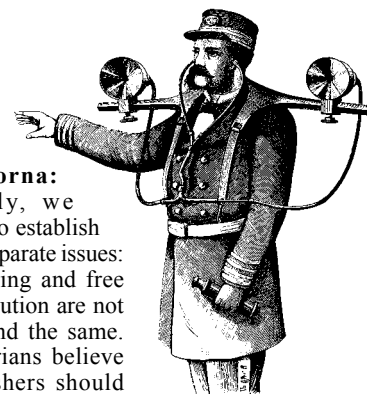
**Morna:** Consortia have arisen to negotiate better pricing for individual library members. One online subscription can technically serve an entire group of libraries, and that translates into fewer subscriptions for publishers. However, it is still in the best interest of a publisher to lower prices for consortia. By providing service to consortia, journal content is distributed more widely than would otherwise be the case, resulting in more access, more citation, and more exposure for the science published in that journal. It is tougher for smaller and single-title publishers to develop consortia relationships, because there is less price flexibility. However, association publishers really have to look at providing expanded access for online journals. Technology has also created a need for different positions, requiring publishing staff who are able to engage in direct communication with librarians, aggregators, and subscription agents to untangle service and licensing requirements.

**Amber:** *Where do you see common pitfalls that encumber both librarians and publishers?*

**Morna:** Subscription pricing and site license models. There is a desire on the part of some publishers to retain the traditional economic base of print journals, while global access to Web-based journals makes this harder to do. Associations have the added concern of losing membership in the face of remote access that is available to scientists through their institutions. The association publisher's concern becomes, "by making site licenses flexible, will we lose membership?"

Market forces that we cannot predict will be at work; however, the wrong thing to do would be to tighten up the customer's ability to access online journals. This would only lead to resistance from libraries. Over-inflating prices for online access is another common mistake publishers make.

**Amber:** *What is your perspective on the effort to store all information on one site (such as PubMed) for the purpose of free access?*



**Morna:**

Firstly, we need to establish two separate issues: archiving and free distribution are not one and the same. Librarians believe publishers should be responsible for archiving back issues. They are interested in access guaranteed in perpetuity. Archiving of print means having multiple copies around the world rather than a depository of journals buried in some unreachable place. In order to maintain an accessible archive, a system of redundancy rather than burial will work better.

Free distribution begs the question of what it takes to produce a journal. Someone has to pay to take an issue through the process of peer-review, copyediting, formatting for legibility, structure and so on. The model of an end user paying for this process is the prevalent model in our society. The model that involves government participation in provision of such information is a more socialist model and not the standard in a society such as ours. Where there is an end product, it is customary that the end user pays for it. There is no such thing as a free lunch.

Publishers have set up a system of disseminating information and we've entrusted the library community, as brokers of information, to pay for what is valuable. These filters ensure that what is maintained as an archive is quality scientific information.

We have to take a good look at a proposal to make something free that is not free to produce. We have to look at the permanency of government funding before depending on such a proposition. If you look at the filters currently in place, then there is a strong argument to maintain libraries as gateways. 🌿