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PROBLEMS IN DOCUMENTING INTERNATIONAL PRICES*

By Frederick C. Lynden

Current Situation:

This presentation will not look at the current library materials price crisis from a political viewpoint, but rather a data gathering perspective. After making a trip, in 1986 sponsored by the Nijhoff company, specifically for the purpose of discovering sources for European price data, it was discouraging to realize that there was very little published data on European prices of use to academic libraries, but it was heartening to discover that there are possibilities for increasing the information available. Therefore, one of the first questions which should be addressed here is what data is available on the prices of European publications supplied to academic libraries? There are no academic price indexes for France, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain. However, since a presentation made to a WESS discussion group in San Francisco in 1987 on the Nijhoff project, a number of significant developments have occurred:

- First, *ISD 9230*, the book price index standard, is about to be released as a draft international standard. It will serve as a guideline for new price indexes making all data gathered easier to compare.
- Second, during their next general meeting, the LIBER Group will discuss the problem of how to develop price indexes for European library materials. This group will be meeting in Spain in April 1989 to consider what progress can be made.

* A paper presented at the ACRL/Western European Studies (WESS) Conference in Florence, Italy, April 7, 1988. Frederick C. Lynden is Assistant University Librarian for Technical Services, Brown University Library, Providence, Rhode Island.

- Third, Rolf Griebel, Associate University Librarian, Bamberg University, is currently working with the IFLA section on Acquisitions and Exchange to encourage academic price indexes. This group is also considering how best to approach the gathering of data on the prices of library materials. He recommended at the IFLA Brighton meeting a project on price indices for academic library materials.

- Last, the U.S. and Germany now have academic book price indexes. Knut Dorn, *Otto Harrassowitz*, provided the A.L.A., Library Materials Price Index Committee (LMPIC), with data, and Steven E. Thompson, Brown University Library, has now produced a German academic book price index. The index has a base year of 1984; uses a calendar year time frame; and reports in German marks. The overall average German Mark price for German books changed 1 % between 1985 + 86 and 6,5 % between 1986 + 87.

1984	%	1985	%	1986	%	1987	%
60.24		59.63	-1	58.98	-1	62.84	+6.5

Thus, there has been very low local inflation of German prices. Therefore, for American libraries it is the weakness of the dollar which has affected the costs of German library books.

In summary, there is currently very sparse information for documenting the prices of European academic materials. A major exception is the *British Academic Book Price Index*, created in 1974 by J. L. Schofield of the Cambridge Library Management Research Unit, and now maintained by Peter H. Mann, the Library and Information Statistics Unit, Loughborough University in England. With the development of a German academic book price index and an acceleration of interest in the creation of such indexes, the future for improved management data on the prices of European library materials is very promising. However, significant (not insurmountable) problems remain.

Before describing what data is now available, it is worth explaining what uses can be made of such data. The data gathered from foreign price reports can be used by librarians:

1. to justify increases in the library's book budget.
2. to allocate the materials budget by subject categories.
3. to analyze cost trends and plan future budgets.
4. to aid librarians in interpreting collection program costs to funding authorities
5. to determine the impact of material cost increases on other library programs.

In summary, it would be a significant contribution to libraries seeking to obtain funds for materials if there were some standard and reliable sources of data on the costs of foreign materials. With research librarians spending millions of dollars on materials, it is important for them to be able to do cost projections based upon real market figures. Computers now make it possible for publishers, vendors and librarians to keep more accurate and complete data on price trends.

Problems of Documenting Prices

What kind of problems exist in documenting prices? European librarians should realize that the development of U.S. price indexes has evolved over a period of more than thirty years and a number of significant issues have been identified which need to be considered when developing price indexes for European book prices. Probably the most significant problem in documenting the price changes of academic library materials is identifying a source of information. First, a source has to be national, i.e. it needs to cover price changes for books and serials supplied from a particular country. Librarians can then use this data for justifying budget proposals to their administrative authorities. Second, the source has to be able to distinguish among books and journals which are of interest to academic libraries. Third, the source has to have authoritative, accurate, and reliable (i.e. regular and dependable) information. Fourth, there needs to be several years of data available for comparison purposes, and no significant changes in the basis of the data should have been made during the comparison period. Finally, the source has to use standard (i.e. commonly accepted) statistical conventions, subject headings, and classification systems.

For major European publishing countries (France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands), there is either a national bibliographic and/or a national book trade association which publishes price data for books:

France	<i>Livres Hebdo, Bibliographie de la France</i>
Germany	<i>Deutsche Bibliographie, Buch und Buchhandel in Zahlen</i>
Italy	<i>Bibliografia Nazionale Italiana</i>
Netherlands	<i>Brinkman's Cumulatieve Catalogus Van Boeken, Stichting Speurwerk's Titel Productie Vreemdtaleg</i>

Unfortunately, neither the national bibliographies nor national trade sources have proven to reflect the prices which academic libraries pay for books. Generally, academic materials are a subset of what is published in a nation. Therefore, these sources cannot be used as a measure of price changes for academic materials. Distinguishing what type of materials are "academic" in nature is difficult at best and misleading at worst. When the *British Academic Book Price Index* was first developed at Cambridge, a *modus operandi* was conceived which assured that the coverage of index would be "academic". All copyrighted books sent to Cambridge University (which by law is a copyright depository) and those books selected for retention at the university were deemed "academic". Unfortunately, similar circumstances are difficult to duplicate elsewhere. In the U.S. no major academic library is a depository. Therefore, the U.S. library community had to find a source for prices of academic materials. In the U.S., librarians turned to provision of data by vendors who supply solely "academic" libraries. Not only does a vendor have the correct clientele but the price data is usually up-to-date and accurate. A further advantage is that frequently the data is computerized.

While it is possible to use the national bibliography or trade association annual as a source (i.e. when prices are available and there is no mixture of older titles), the information is still not applicable to the academic situation. How many times has the *Publishers Weekly* shown a drop in price when most academic libraries are experiencing price increases? The same situation has applied to *Bookseller* data when compared with the *British Academic Book Price Index*. The great advantage to national bibliographies or trade association annuals is that the information is authoritative.

The information is also published and can be obtained by anyone. The University of California has long relied for its budget justification upon data available from *Publishers Weekly*. Instead of using the annual information, they use a three year average. The UC System Office submits its budget to the state legislature and the state legislature finds creditable only the reports from *Publishers Weekly*. Based on MARC data, *Publishers Weekly* is the defacto U.S. national bibliography.

It is clear in Europe as well that national bibliographies and trade annuals cannot serve the academic library as a source for prices because they include non-scholarly materials; vary too much in coverage; and increasingly do not report prices. It is also evident that the *only* other major price information source for academic libraries is the book/serial seller who supplies libraries. Recently three price indexes produced in the U.S. have relied on vendors for data:

U.S. *Academic Book Price Index:*
 Blackwell North America
 Baker and Taylor
 Coutts

British *Academic Book Price Index:*
 Blackwell of England

German *Academic Book Price Index:*
 Otto Harrassowitz

European librarians should be aware that there are problems associated with using vendors. First, how is a vendor found who covers an entire national output? For the U.S. it was felt that at least 3 or 4 vendors would be required. The *U.S. Academic Book Price Index* has had problems reconciling the reports of three vendors each including some of the same titles more than once. It is also difficult to identify European vendors who cover national output for academic libraries. Second, what should the coverage period be? Should it be imprint year (which blurs into the following year); fiscal year; or calendar year receipts? For example, calendar year was chosen for the *German Academic Book Price Index* because it was the easiest way

for the vendor to cut off new receipts. A third and serious problem is the ability of a library organization to make changes in a vendor's price study. Since the vendor's database is frequently designed as a tool for the vendor, applications for the purpose of an index may require programming changes which the vendor may not wish to make or may not be able to afford. Due to these problems, vendor price studies of value to academic libraries may be difficult to arrange.

Fourth. Another significant problem is comparability. To compare price studies, it is necessary to have some common or standard features among the studies. Sally Williams, our program chair, in an article in *Book Research Quarterly*, has mentioned some important attributes of "useful" studies:

1. Timeliness
2. Consistency over time
3. Meaningful price categories
4. Compliance with national or international standards

Is the study up-to-date and available to libraries quickly? Many of the national bibliographies are not up-to-date whereas vendor studies are. Is the study consistent over time, i.e. does it use the same methodology and database? Are the price categories meaningful? In other words, are the subject headings common to libraries and the classification system understood by librarians? Finally, does the study follow recognized national and international standards? If the study is *not* up-to-date; consistent; meaningful; and standard, then there can be problems in documenting prices.

An Agenda for the Future:

I've mentioned *only* problems, what about the future? First, every European and American library should document its own local price changes based on its own mix of acquisitions. Second, ALA, ARL, ACRL, and LIBER should identify potential sources for national "academic" price data and recommend that these sources produce price indexes. Third, these organizations should encourage not only book price indexes but also serial price

indexes. Fourth, the price indexes should follow national and international standards as closely as possible. Finally, these price indexes should be given maximum publicity and at the same time be evaluated by librarians for their effectiveness. These steps should provide the necessary data to follow what is happening to book and journal prices. Then, based on data available, librarians must use political and economic strategies to insure that libraries receive reasonable budgetary increases and pay fair and equitable prices for materials.

Conclusion:

Before closing, additional remarks should be made about prices at the moment. One must recognize that much of the current collection budgetary crisis stems from the weakening of the dollar and publisher pricing policies. However, to persuade budget authorities to increase library materials funds, or to throw the glare of harsh publicity on excessive prices, one must document library collection price changes. Collection managers must be prepared to collect local data on costs and compare this data with recognized national price indexes in order to authenticate the severity of the price changes. Then, and only then will it be possible for librarians to manage their collections effectively.

It is hoped that more local price studies and national price indexes of European academic library materials will be published. The librarians here can take the lead by attempting to document local price changes and encouraging vendors, trade associations or national libraries to publish price data.