of importance? Who will preserve at least one copy of the print materials that are being replaced by online content? In the quest to perfect digital preservation techniques, will online content recognition technology be as robust and timeless a means of preservation as the book has been for printed content?

Where are we headed? No one knows, for example, whether today’s search engines will be free of charge or will even exist in 2050. What form and extent will open access, institutional repositories, and self-archiving have in the future? What shape will publication/purchase business models take? What attitudes will prevail toward the integrity of information and the preservation of original content? While the details of “brave new world, 2050” are unknown today, those with a stake in the world of information and scholarly communication have a unique moment in history to shape the future of library collections — for better or for worse.

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From the University Presses — Dissertations into Books? The Lack of Logic in the System

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Although the academy has been the progenitor of much creative thinking about systems and how they function — in such manifestations as general systems theory in the 1950s, cybernetics in the 1960s, catastrophe theory in the 1970s, chaos theory in the 1980s, and complexity theory in the 1990s — there has not been much effort to apply what Peter Senge called in his popular 1990 book of that name “the fifth discipline,” or systems thinking, to the study of the academy itself. But there is no doubt that the university is a very complex kind of organization indeed, and we need to understand better how all its multitudinous parts interact with each other and how “feedback loops” occur within it if we are to be successful in adapting it to the rapid
changes now under way in its economic, legal, social, and technological dimensions.

In this article I want to focus on just one example of the harm that comes from not “thinking systematically about scholarly communication” (the title of a talk I gave at the 1997 conference on “The Specialized Scholarly Monograph in Crisis” co-sponsored by the ACLS, ARL, and AAUP). We often refer to scholarly communication as a “system,” and it is a system that is fundamental to, but not coextensive with, the “system” of higher education since contributions to it come from outside the academic world, too, through professional societies, the R&D divisions of private industry, the research arms of government agencies, and the like. But I am here concerned with part of that scholarly communication system that is totally in the control of the higher education system: the dissertation.

The dissertation has a long history as a major part of graduate education that I do not need to rehearse here. It is the most important symbol of the neophyte scholar’s claim to be recognized as qualified to do advanced research and to be admitted to the realm of higher education as a “professor” of knowledge in a specialized field. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that it has also emerged as a primary stepping stone on the road to tenure, in the form of a “revised” dissertation that seeks even greater intellectual immortality as a book. With the book widely regarded as the “gold standard” for promotion in many of the humanistic and social scientific disciplines today (as the recent MLA Report documented), it is not surprising that the revised dissertation has become almost a necessity for a junior scholar’s successful passage to tenured status, especially at those institutions where now not only a first completed book is required but also at least significant progress on a second.

Upping the ante in this way seems a perfectly “rational” response by departments to the increasing pressures of competition and selectivity, as universities jockey to secure their places high in the prestige rankings that make so much difference to their overall success in attracting the best faculty, getting the most research grants, and instilling pride in alumni and gaining attention from foundations that lead to greater achievements in fundraising.

But let’s look now at what has been taking place elsewhere on campus. We all know that libraries’ budgets have been under severe strain for decades from the ever-escalating cost of subscriptions to STM journals. And we know that one effect of those budget difficulties has been libraries’ decisions to cut back on the purchases of monographs. Until the mid-1990s there was no particular reason to think that revised dissertations were subjected to any special form of discrimination when fewer monographs were ordered from the vendors that handled approval plans. But then the advance of technology began to transform the way dissertations were made available. UMI always had dissertations to sell, but demand for any one of them in that photocopied form in a small trim size with that ugly-looking blue paper cover was miniscule. As UMI evolved into ProQuest, dissertations became stored electronically, and as the decade wore on more and more universities began launching programs, often first voluntary and then later mandatory (as at Penn state) for students to revise their dissertations. But, with fewer libraries willing to purchase them, fewer presses are willing to consider them, leaving the available outlets ever smaller in number. Is this situation fair to junior faculty? Does it make sense to penalize them for decisions made by other sectors of the university over which they have no control at all?

Well, one might ask, what really is lost if we don’t publish any revised dissertations? We have access to all of them anyway in electronic form, and now they can even be readily purchased through Amazon.com after they are revised. It seems to me that this is a reasonable question to ask. Do revisions constitute sufficient “value added” to justify the cost to the system of prizes publishing them and libraries buying them? As an editor who has spent nearly forty years working with authors on revised dissertations, I want to argue that the correct answer is yes. Although I could provide plenty of examples of dissertations that underwent very substantial revision to become books that have only a faint resemblance to the dissertations whence they originated, I do not want to base my argument on just that kind of evidence alone, for it is true that revisions vary a great deal in their extent and depth and it would be difficult for librarians to identify which dissertations have been only lightly revised and which have been heavily revised. Authors’ acknowledgments, while they often give credit to inspiration and help they received from their dissertation advisers and others, frequently go into far less detail about how much revision was undertaken and what it entailed. Only press editors are privy to such information.

Rather, my main argument comes down to this: if libraries do not buy revised dissertations, and presses do not publish them, some outstanding books might never see the light of day and exert the influence on the fields they have the potential to advance in major ways. I doubt that the best of the dissertations will somehow, magically, come to be rescued from the mass of dissertations in the ProQuest database through Google searching and be recognized for the gems they are, with high rankings in citation indices to follow commensurate with their importance. Let me give you just a few examples of books I have edited over the years that got their start as dissertations and proved, in revised form, to become books that have only a faint resemblance to the dissertations whence they originated, I do not want to base my argument on just that kind of evidence alone, for it is true that revisions vary a great deal in their extent and depth and it would be difficult for librarians to identify which dissertations have been only lightly revised and which have been heavily revised. Authors’ acknowledgments, while they often give credit to inspiration and help they received from their dissertation advisers and others, frequently go into far less detail about how much revision was undertaken and what it entailed. Only press editors are privy to such information.

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Papa Abel Remembers — The Tale of A Band of Booksellers, Fasicle 2: Ready, Set, Go!

by Richard Abel (Aged Independent Learner) <rabel@easystreet.com>

So, in 1948, I was off to the University of California, Berkeley for graduate study in Medieval and Renaissance English history. By way of preparation for an academic career as a professor of history I was expected to undertake the customary graduate TA assignments. The first to which I was assigned in my second year in graduate school was a class in a then required “History and Government of the United States,” a rehash of a high-school civics course — and pitched at about the same level. About half the students were taking the class for the second or more times, which led me to the resolve to get them all through the class so no more taxpayers’ money need be spent on such elementary subject matter for these students. I don’t know if the half of that class that I, in turn, flunked had their grades recast by the Dean but I learned the valuable lesson that I possessed not the patience to deal with a bunch of unmotivated undergraduates. Farewell to an academic career. So the 1949-50 academic year closed on a note of utterly wrecked professorial expectations and with no certain way forward.

What was I to do to support my wife, new daughter, and myself? I called my Reed thesis advisor to seek his counsel. As good fortune would have it the then student manager of the Reed Coop had, it was thought, made an absolute shambles of the place. A week or two later a new career had been cast — entirely without intention, as is so commonly the case of those who wind up in the book-trade. As soon as UC classes were completed the move back to Portland was made.

And indeed what I found was an outfit that had been a growing and prospering scholarly trade bookstore was a shambles. The first summer was spent attempting to recover cash from an absolutely chaotic inventory — automobile tires and batteries, second-hand typewriters; a mis-

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