

# The Amazon Effect, Virtual Approval Plans, and the Changing Nature of Book Selection



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Although the phrase sounds more like the title of a Robert Ludlum thriller than an actual phenomenon, the Amazon Effect echoes through the working days of all of us who deal with books and information: librarians, publishers, and vendors. From its inception, Amazon used the Web to expand the fundamentals of retail bookselling, bringing to readers a vast selection of titles and previously unknown levels of convenience. Because of its prominence in the media and mass market, Amazon has also influenced user expectations for library services: i.e., why doesn't the library's OPAC look more like Amazon.com?

The appeal is easily understood. This morning, I pointed my Web browser at Amazon, where I was welcomed by name. Several recommendations for new book titles anticipated my arrival – some inexplicably, but several of genuine interest. Clustered around the cover image of each title were satellites of bibliographic and evaluative information: a description; publication data; reviews, both editorial and customer; sample pages, including front & back flap copy, full index, table of contents, preface and introduction, excerpts from the text; links to other works by the same author; subject browsing capabilities; and a pre-formulated search by subject category.

In addition, a number of transaction options appeared, including:

- View alternate editions of the content (new/used; paper/cloth; audio CD/audio cassette; various eBook formats)
- Obtain price information for each format
- Add titles to a wish list
- Add titles to shopping cart (select and order)

In essence, a complete suite of services to help an individual identify, evaluate, choose, and transact upon titles of interest. As patrons with the OPAC, library selectors may well ask: "Why don't library book selection tools look more like this?"

We have already seen the beginnings of the transformation of the online library catalog, first in the advent of Web OPACs over the past few years. Perhaps more tellingly, we have begun to see traditional MARC record display enhanced in various ways – with links to excerpted or full text, or to extended metadata, such as tables of contents, reviews, jacket images, etc. Services such as Sirsi's

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iBistro/iLink, Endeavor's LinkFinder Plus, ExLibris's MetaLib and SFX, Innovative Interfaces' WebBridge, and others all (in varying ways) connect the OPAC user conveniently to extended or related resources, and are rapidly being adopted by libraries.

For our purposes here, though, we're interested in the experience of a different type of user—the library selector. In order to make timely buying decisions, selectors need detailed information much earlier in the publishing cycle-- at point of publication, or better yet, at point of announcement. These special requirements present some additional problems. First, most of the linking solutions noted above work only from the OPAC or public display, and not from the Acquisitions or staff display module, where approval "accept/reject" decisions and ordering transactions occur. Second, the current emphasis in linking is on directing the patron to available and appropriate resources—rather than on a selector seeking *potential* resources for acquisition or licensing. For selectors, links to different kinds of resources are needed. Third, because approval plans supply new titles, extended metadata and reviews are often not yet available at the time of selection.

In the articles that follow, we will focus on emerging solutions to these problems. We will consider how the increasing availability and use of extended metadata and the technologies that underpin it might transform approval plan and notification slip selection. Our premise is that the enabling technologies and standards exist (or will soon exist) that can produce a "virtual book" or enough of a book surrogate to allow a title to be evaluated online—with the same degree of confidence as a book in hand would supply. Such a development could change both types of approval selection; notification slips or form selections would carry links to much more extensive data, while acceptance or rejection of profiled approval books could be done before the physical books were shipped.

Granting for just a moment that this selection environment, which we'll refer to as the "Virtual Approval Plan", can be created, we need to explore its effect on new title selection. In some respects, this concept is less a potential product than a vehicle for examining the changing nature of selection in libraries. Even given a complete electronic surrogate for every new title, it is not clear whether monographs will continue to be selected title-by-title (either through approval review or selection from slips) or whether, as some suspect, less and less such activity will take place, as selectors are pulled in other directions by their myriad responsibilities. Will selection be

increasingly managed in collections or "subject chunks" of content, either by relying on the approval profile (and not reviewing books), or, as with electronic journal packages and eBooks, by purchasing pre-defined collections of content?

This edition of ATG attempts to explore, synthesize, and speculate upon a number of developments in the library marketplace: the Amazon Effect; the continuing evolution of ILS and book vendor Web systems; ONIX; DOI; OpenURL and related services such as SFX; the emergence of metadata providers such as Syndetic Solutions and Informata's Content Server; and the ability to link diverse Web resources in a "synoptic" view—as through an SFX or DOI "extended services" menu. Our hypothesis is that creative use of these elements could result in a new service that may be of interest to libraries and vendors: the Virtual Approval Plan. We believe that such a service is within reach, in terms of both technology and data availability. We'll try to make that case. But the real intent is to open up thinking about how library content selection might evolve – with or without such tools.

We've been fortunate to enlist some excellent contributors, each of whom will look at a different facet of this question. The discussion is structured along these lines, and we recommend reading these articles in the order suggested below.

### 1) What extent and kinds of descriptive metadata are available immediately upon or before publication? From what sources?

- ONIX and Publishers: Michael Holdsworth of Cambridge University Press describes the evolution of ONIX, an XML-based standard for new title information, and in particular how Cambridge has created a Web-accessible DataShop to provide ONIX files to vendors, online booksellers, and other interested parties. He notes the advantages to librarians and vendors, and argues for the publisher as source of authoritative information about its books. *"And all of this can be made available months before the first copy of the book is even printed."* [Read "**ONIX: A Transforming Standard**"]. Clearly, for ONIX information to be a useful component of a virtual approval shelf, where the works of hundreds of publishers may be represented, widespread adoption and implementation by publishers is necessary.

- Major approval vendors increasingly provide extended metadata in the electronic slips offered via Web services such as Blackwell's Collection Manager or YBP's GOBI. Blackwell's pioneered the capture of Table of Contents data in the mid-1990s, and TOC data is now available via Collection Manager for most approval titles. Typically, the table of contents is available within one week of approval profiling—in time to inform a selection decision. YBP, similarly, obtains TOC information from Informata's "Content Server" and makes it available via GOBI.
- Third-Party Metadata Providers: Syndetic Solutions, Informata, and Bowker, among others, now create, aggregate, and host or distribute descriptive metadata to libraries, online booksellers, ILS vendors, and their partners.

Informata's *Content Server* currently contains 625,000 jacket scans and 250,000 tables of contents. Full-text reviews are under verbal agreements and will be incorporated within the next few months. Annotations, mainly from publisher marketing copy, will also be added. Although provision of full-text presents licensing issues, Informata is seeking to license excerpts. All of this data is available by license to ILS or book vendors, for OPAC or staff side display.

Syndetic Solutions currently makes available 370,000 tables of contents (aggregated from Blackwell's and Ingram) 200,000 annotations (from Book News); first chapters and excerpts; cover images (from Ingram) author biographies, and reviews from CHOICE. Syndetics also offers a unique service for fiction titles, in which genre, sub-genre, location, and characters are explicitly identified and tagged. Discussions are underway with some academic publishers for 2-3 page excerpts that might be displayed under Fair Use terms. Future plans include provision of indexes and bibliographies.

OCLC Extended WorldCat: As of December 2001, OCLC began receiving "evaluative" data, including cover images, book summaries, and author notes from publisher catalogs, as well as table of contents data from Ingram. In

addition, of course, WorldCat provides a full MARC record and holdings information for one's own library and others—information which can also influence a selection decision.

Bowker's *booksinprint.com* includes data on *Forthcoming Books* as well as tables of contents, cover images, reviews, and "Hooks to Holdings" a feature that allows an OPAC search using Z39.50. Like Informata, they also provide real-time inventory data for several vendors, via OptiWare.

## **2) Structuring a "synoptic view" of diverse Web resources from the Acquisitions module, or from vendor Web systems. What standards and technologies can enable linking to extended metadata, and bringing it conveniently to the attention of selectors?**

If metadata might be available from any number of sources, as is currently the case, the best hope for obtaining a critical mass of information rests in using *all* available sources, but without having to search or query each individually. The selector requires a "synoptic" view of possible selection determinants, including descriptive metadata, holdings information, fund availability, and a record of comments or decisions by other selectors. The most compelling representations of a synoptic view are the library-defined "extended services" menus produced by services like SFX and WebBridge (though the former relies on the more flexible OpenURL, while the latter relies on a fixed and predictable URL.)

Extended services for a library selector would encompass all available bibliographic information about a title, up to and including temporary access to the full text. It would include links to alternate versions of the content, other works by the same author, links to library or consortial holdings, transaction information, and a facility for recording decisions or opinions and communicating with other selectors. Most, if not all, of these capabilities exist now, but they are dispersed across multiple systems and providers. Linking them could, in effect, create a selector's workstation.

But where should this synoptic view be created—i.e., where does the selector most often work? In the vendor Web system? In the ILS selection/acquisitions module? (In reality, most selectors probably still work from paper slips or from hands-on review of approval

books, but which system do they consult for additional information and to record their selection decisions?)

- Innovative Interfaces' Ted Fons argues for the centrality of the ILS in the virtual approval plan model. Innovative is currently the only vendor to support user-defined external Web linking from the Acquisitions module, using a tool known as WebBridge. **[Read "The Virtual Selection Process—The ILS Perspective"]**
- While Innovative's WebBridge is unique in its accessibility via the Acquisitions module, it does rely on a predictable URL, which limits the resources to which it can link. Linking services such as SFX, based on the OpenURL framework, offer an alternative, by "providing a standardized format for transporting bibliographic metadata about objects between information services." In effect, an information resource that is OpenURL-aware generates an actionable URL upon demand. A user's "service component" (e.g., its SFX server) will then provide appropriate extended service links, based on rules and resources defined in SFX by the library administrator. For a selector, the extended services might include holdings from OCLC, a table of contents from Syndetic Solutions, an excerpt from the publisher's ONIX site, full text display via ebrary, and a bibliographic record within the library's Collection Manager account. Provided, of course, that all of these resources are OpenURL-compliant. There is work to be done to create this environment, but many of the tools and materials already exist.
- OCLC Resolution Services is still in development but boasts an innovative design. Formerly known as Open Names, this is essentially a global registry for metadata, clustered around the ISTC (International Standard Text Code), a pre-ISBN identifier. (This use of ISTC, rather than ISBN, as a nucleus for versions and services is a major development in itself, with much import for this discussion, but is beyond our scope for now.) Any metadata provider who has information about a particular work can "register" that metadata with OCLC Resolution Services. In effect, this registry, based on OpenURL, will, similarly to SFX, aggregate and integrate an array of metadata sources. When, for example, a WorldCat search retrieves an ISTC or related ISBN for which descriptive metadata is wanted, the user can opt to view a menu of available metadata sources, and

link to their sites. This service is still being built, and discussions with metadata providers are still in early stages. In addition, it would need to accept a search or link from an ILS or vendor system in order to support selection—else it becomes yet another locale for selection activity. But it bears watching.

#### **4) How might libraries or vendors be affected by a Virtual Approval Plan? What are the barriers? Opportunities?**

Perhaps the most important perspectives are those of selectors and the vendors who might consider such services. We hear from some of them in these additional articles:

- A consortial composition effort from 5 librarians representing the Tri-Colleges (Swarthmore, Bryn Mawr, and Haverford) speculates on possible uses of a virtual approval plan in an environment where approval selection is shared among geographically dispersed selectors at multiple institutions. When several selectors must consider the same title, and share decisions about its merit and eventual location, perhaps "virtuality" increases in value. The fact that Amy McColl and Amy Morrison of Swarthmore College, Eric Pumroy of Bryn Mawr, Norm Medeiros of Haverford, and Linda Bills of the Tri-College Consortium Office managed to collaborate on this article should give us all new hope that cooperative collection development may actually be possible! **[Read "The Virtual Approval Shelf: A Look Towards the Future?"]**
- Stephen Pugh of YBP's International Division writes as an approval profiler with many years of experience with selectors in US and International libraries. Selectors, he argues, barely have time to consider the paper and electronic announcements they now receive—will anyone actually embrace "slips on steroids?" **[Read "The Decline of the Poultry Selector"]**

#### **Some Final Ruminations:**

In this speculation about the virtual approval plan, we've deliberately focused on what may be possible, perhaps stretching credulity. In our temporary suspension of disbelief, we've ignored some very real

questions, which we must at least acknowledge in closing:

- The timeliness of data is critical in new title selection, and many of the data sources discussed still rely upon a published copy of the book to capture cover images, tables of contents, etc. The best hope for improved timeliness rests with publishers, and the degree to which a critical mass of them implement ONIX, with as much information as early in the publishing cycle as possible. That ONIX data may then be imported into vendor systems, or accessed by a link to the publisher site.
- It would be possible to test the timeliness of extended metadata for selection very easily. Identify the 800 or so titles profiled in a typical week by approval vendors. Search each of them in a defined set of extended metadata sources to determine what percentage link to sufficient information for a selection decision that week. Any library school students looking for an interesting project?
- Vendor systems such as GOBI or Collection Manager play a significant role in approval selection in many libraries. For these services to thrive in a virtual approval environment, their systems may need to become OpenURL-compliant—certainly as target resources, perhaps as service providers.

Perhaps the biggest question of all, though, is an economic one: Is it sufficiently in anyone's interest to assemble all the pieces? If we build it, will they buy?