

Are You Being Taken For Your Texts?

by Ray L. Cleveland
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Textbooks have for decades accounted for the largest and often most lucrative section of the publishing industry in North America. The basis for this is the size of the clientele and the fact that the customers form a captive market. School systems cannot choose whether to buy books or not to buy books but only which to buy. University students do not even have that choice. An economically disadvantaged segment of our society, one without full-time income, is required to purchase prescribed texts which on the average cost twice what they should cost.

Among the many factors contributing to the expensive format of textbooks are the goals of those academics who write them—often it would be more accurate to say, who rewrite class lectures and call them books. The author wants the book to bear the external appearance of what he or she thinks it is worth. Also, as often the writer receives a percentage of sales, the higher the writer's profit. While these profits are generally less than expected by the writer and than is commonly supposed, there is still an interest in an expensive book.

Furthermore, in many universities, instructors may receive increases in salary or even promotions on the basis of writing a textbook. So the teacher has a strong economic motive for having a book that will impress administrators, who without specialized knowledge of the subject can't judge much beyond appearance. The bigger the book looks and the more attractive it looks, the more likely the promotion. So teachers who write the textbooks generally favour the expensive format.

Then there are the selectors of the textbooks. Why do instructors select the titles they do? The publishers think they know how to influence the decisions. Many of them provide teachers, especially those with large classes, with free valuable textbooks.

The instructor who has examination copies delivered to the office without effort is furthermore not always motivated to search through books lists or write to minor publishers about alternative texts which are quite as satisfactory and less expensive.

More ominous than rising prices of textbooks is another development. Some major textbook publishers are implementing policies of having more texts written by their professional staff writers in order to make them "more readable." In some cases academics will be used as consultants; in others the academics will work in cooperation with the professionals. The cause for alarm is that in many of the new contracts, once the academic has sold his name for the book, he no longer has legal control over what wording may be used. It may be easier to read a new model book because a very complex problem has been

inaccurately simplified by a non-specialist. Or important nuances of meaning may be lost because the editors insist that words more current be used. Or certain scholarly conclusions may be omitted because the publishers feel they are not popular at this time and may harm sales. Truth, to publishing firms, is what makes sales volume increase, and the new contracts are giving them additional power to overrule the scholars.

The increasing control of the publishers over the contents of textbooks may loom more menacingly in view of the ownership. The giant Holt, Rinehart and Winston is owned by the Columbia Broadcasting System in the U.S. CBS also owns three other publishing houses, as well as a score of popular magazines, TV and radio stations, Columbia records, and a string of retail stores. The publishing house of Little, Brown and Co. is owned by Time Inc., along with many other publishing interests, newspapers, films, broadcasting, and pulp and paper companies. The publishing group made up of Random House, Alfred A. Knopf, Pantheon, and others is owned, along with the National Broadcasting Corporation, by RCA.

The New American Library, along with eight other imprints, belongs to the Times Mirror Company, which also owns TV stations, "information services", newspapers (several major ones), seven magazines, two paper mills, and 320,000 acres of timberland. Simon and Schuster and its half dozen other imprints belong to a multi-national corporation named Gulf and Western, which also owns paper companies, diversified manufacturing and financial interests, Paramount Pictures, and 51 percent of Famous Players Ltd. and its 300 theatres in Canada. Some half dozen corporate giants already have enormous power to influence public opinion, and now they are taking tighter control of the contents of the textbooks which they issue.

There are dangers in the situation. For example, textbooks on political science, history and economics could be restricted in their discussion of conglomerates. Or views held by a scientific consultant on natural resources and the environment may never find a place in books published by a firm associated with mining interests. Other views held by scholarly consultants may become blurred at the hands of a professional writer, for whom accuracy would not hold so high a priority. In short, in the expected course of events, textbooks will take on the political colouring of the management. This trend should be one of concern to all groups in the academic world, as well as to society at large.

Factors accounting for the unreasonably high cost of textbooks include the high-quality materials and format, the uncontrolled duplication

of effort and expense by competing publishers, the personal goals of the authors, and the absence of strong pressure from those who select texts for more economical alternatives. The exorbitant costs are not the fault of your local university book store; for the most part, the high costs can be explained only by factors outside the campus scene and—because of the high percentage of imports—outside of Canada.

Separate from the factors mentioned above is the system of distributing books in Canada. Except for the inexpensive paperbacks of a few publishers not intended exclusively for use as texts, imported books are marked up 20% to 30% by the distributors located in the Toronto area, although many of these distributors for Canada are merely subsidiaries of publishers in Britain or the United States. The secondary handling entails overhead costs requiring such a mark-up, given the necessity of maintaining large inventories for the smaller Canadian market in order to compete for the profits.

Now for the main problem. Many textbooks will be obsolete (if not already so at time of printing) within five or ten years and normally be of no value. Yet they are printed on expensive papers with high-cost special inks and enclosed in a solid binding to insure that they can under ordinary conditions endure without deterioration for three to five centuries! Are these merely practical books from which a student can learn or are they fetishes?

Consider the expensive treated paper which will not yellow or become brittle until long after the purchaser's remains consist of only a yellowed skeleton in the grave. These heavy papers often cost four times as much as paper which is serviceable for only 20 or 30 years. Or consider that the actual production cost of a hard binding on an octavo book is now above \$2.00 minimum and sometimes nearly twice that. When these bindings reach the shelf of the book store, the hard cover has increased in value to about \$3 to \$5, or

even more. If given the choice, how many students would prefer a 50c stiff paper cover? But students are seldom given this choice by the major publishers.

With less expensive inks, printing processes, layouts, paper and binding, the book you now pay \$18 to buy could, except unusual books like art books, be sold for \$5. One wonders if the fact that many of the publishers are owned by conglomerates which also own paper mills, printing plants, ink manufacturers, and binderies has anything to do with the kind of books which are offered to the captive customers.

Competition in the market place is supposed to result in lower prices and less expensive wares, but this has not happened with textbooks. Publishers have instead vied by making the textbooks more

attractive and therefore more expensive in order to persuade the selectors to prescribe their books rather than the competitors'. Also, in order to get in on the big sales to introductory classes, publishers put out competing titles. In some fields there are a score or more textbooks on the market with little or no significant differences. Each publisher then has to revise its book in that field every few years so as to give the illusion of being improved and brought up to date. So each firm then is paying duplicated costs of designing, layout and typesetting of its "new" edition, which is seldom better than the old. This duplication of production costs must be covered by the higher price of the "new" edition.

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