Priorities for Publishing Research

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The author suggests a wide-ranging research agenda, including applying and safeguarding copyright, increasing literacy, comparing the appropriate uses of the printed word and other media, understanding language itself, assisting authors to get their work into print, improving statistics about the industry, predicting the future of suppliers as well as publishers themselves, improving distribution, and influencing the likely future of the information superhighway.

The focus of this essay is the publishing business, though that is obviously intimately involved with publishing in all its aspects. Further, the implicit focus is on book publishing though, as will be seen, that distinction may often be too pronounced. Moreover, it will try to raise the basic questions, not to answer them.

Publishing

To me, ever since I first became involved in the business, while studying for an MBA with a thesis on textbook publishing almost forty years ago, publishing has been best defined as the marketing of proprietary information. I further define marketing in this sense as: gathering information for which the market has a desire or need; processing it into the format in which the market will find it most useful; and distributing (including selling) it to those (individuals or groups) who can best use it; with sufficient returns (royalties and profits) to the providers to enable them to remain involved in the process and to attract others.

Research

Research can be used at each step of that process, but often taste, judgment, and experience are just as effective (or more so). The latter tools are less expensive and more commonly employed.

But the thesis of this issue of Publishing Research Quarterly is that research is desirable and I certainly agree. Because of the nature of the industry, which comprises thousands of small firms (as well as a few relatively large corpora-
tions), most of the basic research is probably best done by universities and trade associations. But perhaps a first priority for research is to determine who can and will do the necessary work.

**Information**

I define information as organized elements (characters, numerals, graphic elements, etc.) that convey thoughts from one human being to another (for the mass media, obviously to many others). I mean the term as all-encompassing, from poetry and novels to reference works and tabular data. Perhaps its distinguishing characteristic is that it can be copyrighted (is unique and therefore proprietary). It is that attribute that lies behind its ability to provide income to its authors and publishers. The information can be sold, if successfully, for more than its costs of publishing.

**Copyright**

I shall return to the nature of published information, but its necessary proprietary quality raises the second basic issue: copyright—the ownership of a work.

In my opinion, the existence of copyright is the unrecognized sine qua non of profitable, and therefore of nongovernmental, publishing, and thus the key to its existence in a democratic society. Some one or thing must pay for the costs of the process, whether it be advertisers, or individual(s) and corporations deriving wealth from other sources, or government(s). In a free society, an individual should be able to acquire the information he or she wants without depending on the agendas of others. Competitive, profit-making publishing, primarily paid for by its individual users, supplemented by such institutions as libraries, seems to be the best way to ensure a massive, varied flow of information. But is it? And can it be ensured by copyrighting information?

There are two key copyright issues that must be addressed these days: applications and safeguards. Since the years of congressional debates preceding the writing of the current copyright law, it has been clear that the many complexities introduced by modern technology have made it extremely difficult to define copyright and related terms such as fair use. Likewise, these technologies make it hard to ensure access to works without permitting their widespread reproduction. That could make copyright useless.

The resolution of these issues is currently surfaced in the talks on the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. They are also under discussion in the United Nations and many other bodies. Ultimately, copyright must depend on legislation and judicial interpretation, the province of lawyers. But scholars of publishing, other media, history, society, and economics should contribute to the debate, and both historical and contemporaneous research could help.