



# The Blanket Order

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LIBRARIANSHIP is an exciting, challenging profession, but it does at times seem overlaid with an aura of general agreement which tends to make everything pleasant, hazy, and infernally dull. Of course catalogers disagree with acquisitions people, and public service people do not see why the technical processing people have to take *that* attitude, but to try to find a really basic area of disagreement among librarians in comparable jobs at different institutions is becoming increasingly difficult.

The concept of dealer selection blanket orders or approval plans has long been a shining exception in this bland but somewhat depressing picture. You could nearly always get a good argument going among a group of librarians by just saying the magic words "blanket order." Cries of (or at least remarks to the effect that) "You're abdicating the librarian's most sacred responsibility" alternated with "It's the greatest aid to book selection since the invention of bifocals," and the emotional temperature in the room was certain to rise several degrees.

In order to test the breadth and depth of this disagreement, and to attempt to get some sort of picture of the impact of the phenomenon of the blanket order on research libraries' acquisition policies and procedures, a questionnaire was sent to the heads of the acquisition departments of the seventy-nine member libraries of the Association of Research Libraries. Replies were received from fifty-two libraries, and they tended to confirm my suspicion that another major bulwark of controversy is crumbling even as we examine it.

The first question asked was: "Do you currently have in effect any sort of blanket order or approval plan which involves dealer selection?" Forty-four of the fifty-two responding libraries indicated that they did have, with most of these indicating this with a simple, un-

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qualified "yes." Answers to subsequent questions revealed certain differences in the plans, with some libraries distinguishing carefully between "blanket orders" and "approval plans," but most of the plans described were ones in which the dealer selects materials according to specific guidelines, with these selections being reviewed by the library, and a small number of titles being returned. The only feature which *all* the plans described have in common, however, is that they all involve dealer selection in some way.

Of the eight libraries which have no such plans, one indicated it was considering a blanket order arrangement for German language material, and the rest left their "no's" unqualified (although two did select from cards supplied by dealers).

The replies to the question as to which countries or languages these plans cover, and which dealers are involved, indicate that there is still a wide diversity in the use of the blanket order, if not in the principle. The difference in the number of such plans the various libraries have, in effect, reflects to an extent this diversity. Seven libraries have one plan, eleven have two, four have three, seven have four, four have five, two have seven, and one library each has eight, ten, twelve, fifteen, eighteen, twenty, thirty-two, thirty-five, thirty-eight, and forty plans.

There are great similarities in breadth of subject coverage among many of the libraries, with an "average" profile of all the respondents perhaps reading something like this: "includes the social sciences and humanities; excludes medicine, law, agriculture, and in many cases all science." There are of course wide variations among individual libraries, reflecting in part the differing scope of the libraries' collecting responsibilities, as with the John Crerar, which wants only scientific, technical and medical publications, and the National Agriculture Library, which wants only material on agriculture and related subjects, but reflecting also a differing degree of willingness to depend on such a tool. The less committed approach might be exemplified by the University of California, Berkeley, which has blanket orders for books on all subjects published in North Vietnam, for specific subjects published in Iran, Iraq, Latin America, Thailand, and Turkey, and on specific subjects in the fine arts in the United States and Europe. This can be contrasted with the University of Chicago, which has only three plans, United States, German language, and Russian, but whose coverage is "All subjects (Science excluded from Russian order)."

Another interesting aspect of the blanket order picture is the extent to which a very few dealers seem to dominate it. While not all the respondents to the questionnaire named specific dealers, and while no claim is made as to the representativeness of those who did name them, still the breakdown of dealer distribution is not without interest. Richard Abel & Co. has some sort of blanket order or approval plan with twenty-two of the libraries, as does Otto Harrassowitz. Stechert-Hafner's Latin American Cooperative Acquisition Project (LACAP) program has fifteen customers among the group, Livres Etrangers has eleven, Martinus Nijhoff and the Centro Interamericano de Libros Academicos each have seven, Stevens & Brown and Kubon & Sagner each have five, and C. G. Rosenberg has four plans for art books. Beyond that, four dealers have some sort of plan with three libraries, eighteen have them with two, and fifty-one with one.

The dealer's method of indicating what he has sent or is going to send does not seem to admit of many variations. Twenty libraries replied that the dealer sent a marked copy or a national trade bibliography when one was available. Most of the rest said that the invoice, and in some cases printed slips sent either ahead of or with the shipment, were their only means of knowing what was sent. One library made cryptic mention of "advance notice" being sent of material to be received and one said his dealer "occasionally sends lists," but the mechanics of both of these was unclear.

The variations in method by which the various libraries reviewed the dealer's selections seem to be largely in terms of the designation (and in some cases, of course, the position) of the reviewer. Thus the books are reviewed, we are told, by "bibliographers," "subject librarians," "acquisitions librarians," "reference librarians," "departmental librarians," "all interested librarians," and "library staff and faculty." Other comments include "spot check," "very little screening necessary," "dealer selections are usually satisfactory," "no regular method of review at this time," "we accept nearly everything," and simply "no review," although the majority of libraries did indicate a reviewing procedure by certain specifically designated staff members.

Unfortunately the next question seems to have been stated somewhat ambiguously and thus generated two separate and distinct groups of answers. The question, as stated, was: "If possible, please indicate approximately what percentage of your purchases from blanket order dealers are selected by the dealer?" The question was predicated on the assumption 1) that libraries make selections of cur-

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rent books in addition to those sent by the blanket order dealer, and 2) that these additional selections are ordered from the blanket order dealer, and it represented an attempt to determine what percentage of the total books purchased from a country's current output is selected by the dealer (and, of course, what percentage is selected by the library). A number of the libraries seemed to interpret the question as it was intended, and figures like 40 percent from the Library of Congress, 50 percent from Iowa State and UCLA, 55-60 percent from Toronto, and 30-70 percent from the National Library of Medicine were within the realm of logic. However, some were confused, and the nature of the ambiguity of the question was stated clearly by the University of Arizona: "The meaning of the question is obscured because if questions 1-5 related to *dealer* selected acquisitions, then the answer to this question is 100 percent less items rejected. You may be inquiring as to whether we use blanket dealers for our own selection, e.g., whether we use Abel as a jobber. The answer is 'yes.'" In addition, many of the libraries indicated 100 percent or "approximately 90 percent—by this I mean that we reject about 10 percent of what is sent," or, again, "all are selected by them, we reject about 5-7 percent of their selections." Obviously this question was poorly stated, or else none of the libraries answering in this manner initiate any orders for titles not selected by blanket order dealers. (About this possibility, more later.) At any rate the ambiguity of the question rendered the results somewhat less than useful, since in many instances it was not possible to tell in which way the respondent interpreted the question. (What, for example, does 80 percent from the University of Georgia mean, or 90 percent from the John Crerar Library?)

Summarizing the responses to the question about the major advantages and disadvantages of blanket orders was done in rather Procrustean fashion. In order to increase the usefulness of this article, the 102 advantages listed on the returned questionnaires were grouped into eleven classes and the forty-eight listed disadvantages were put into twelve categories.

Of the advantages mentioned, three are clearly of paramount importance, since they were mentioned by more than half the libraries which have blanket order plans. Twenty-nine libraries mentioned that receiving materials more promptly was a real advantage, while twenty-three mentioned that the assurance of getting broader coverage without being dependent on the "sporadic and unpredictable" selection

of faculty and staff and getting the material before it goes out of print was of real importance (with an additional four commenting on the particular advantages of coverage in areas without adequate bibliographies or where exotic languages present special selection difficulties), and twenty-five libraries expressed approval at not having to prepare individual orders. Eight mentioned the advantage of being able to select with the physical book in hand, rather than from a review or an entry in a national or trade bibliography (and one mentioned the advantage of having the dealer select initially with the book in *his* hand).

Five libraries indicated that faculty and staff freed from routine ordering of current books could spend more of their time on antiquarian and backfile ordering, and three felt that concentrating the bulk of one's purchasing with one dealer in an area allowed one to ask for special services from that dealer which could not be asked otherwise (although this was felt by some to be a two-edged sword, as we shall see when we look at the disadvantages).

Only three other advantages were mentioned, each by one library. One was the elimination of the necessity for order checking, another was the smaller number of invoices which needed to be handled, and the third was the at least potential advantage of receiving machine-readable cataloging information from Abel.

The disadvantages mentioned were neither as numerous nor as concentrated as the advantages. The largest number of libraries which mentioned any one disadvantage was eleven, and this related to the uncertainty about receiving any particular title, particularly when it had been specially requested. Ten talked about the marginal and ephemeral material which comes into the library as a result of blanket orders (and which is not always returned), and six mentioned higher prices (with five of these mentioning one particular dealer and the sixth indicating simply that "these programs are costly," which may of course refer to the greater number of books received rather than to the prices of individual titles).

Five libraries considered the loss of fiscal control a disadvantage worth mentioning, and five commented on the greater number of duplicates received, as a result of exchanges, standing orders, and simultaneous publication in more than one country, with the same number mentioning poor selection by blanket order dealers (either too few titles or simply the wrong ones).

Perhaps the most interesting thing about the disadvantages listed

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by the libraries is that only four of them mentioned the delegation or elimination of book selection by librarians as a disadvantage, and one of these qualified his objection so completely he negated it by saying, "However, by having the opportunity to see material first hand and return unwanted material, this disadvantage seems to become an advantage." This small expression against delegating book selection responsibility would seem to dispose of what some have called "widespread objections to abdicating the librarian's most sacred responsibility," at least among these libraries (and at least for now).

The "two-edged sword" mentioned earlier was touched on by three libraries which expressed concern over becoming too dependent on their blanket order dealer. As one library put it, "Necessary concentration of orders with one agent puts one at the mercy of that agent; if service deteriorates, one's whole acquisitions program suffers."

Two libraries mentioned the difficulties of communicating one's exact needs to a dealer, both in establishing a blanket order and later in modifying it, and one said that "a disadvantage is the returns."

The University of Arizona Library touched on an entirely different aspect of the blanket order program, its effect on publishing, in its comment that the blanket order, "if accepted by every library, would tend to erode the quality of creative and scholarly writing, by providing a 'guaranteed income' to marginal and less successful publishing ventures."

The eighth question was a simple one: "Are you planning to increase the use of dealer selection, decrease it, or maintain it at its present level?" In many ways this question was also the most important one in the questionnaire, for it gave us the clearest insight into just where we are heading in terms of these programs.

Of the forty-four libraries which indicated that they had some sort of dealer selection program, twenty-three indicated they were planning to increase these programs when they could. A few had some reservations about the nature and extent of the increase, such as the library which mentioned hoping to "confine them to areas where regular orders are not satisfactory, whether because of lack of prompt information . . . or small editions." Another library mentioned increasing "in special areas, such as atlases," but most of the "increase" answers were unqualified.

Thirteen libraries indicated that they were planning to maintain their blanket order programs at about the same level, and *just one indicated a decrease, and this was not voluntary.* This library said,

"We have had to decrease because of a sizeable budget reduction; otherwise we would have liked to expand the number of orders."

Three libraries said they were undecided, two did not answer the question, one said yes, and one said no.

The conclusion, then, is obvious: those who have blanket order programs like them. With the possible exception of the one "no" answer, none of the libraries with such programs showed any indication of wishing to cut back on them, and the majority (a bare majority, but a majority) indicated that they wanted to increase them.

Additional comments about the blanket order programs were requested, and they ran the gamut from expressions of unqualified praise ("Great! especially for large academic libraries" and "The faculty, library staff, and students are 'sold' on this form of purchasing. I doubt if our faculty would allow us to discontinue the program") to remarks on some of the ramifications of these programs: "It is *vital* that there be adequate or better than adequate review of dealer selections"; "Most important are 1) selection of a good agent, and 2) providing him with a precise profile of your needs;" and "Faculty approval and cooperation are most important in assuring the successful functioning of blanket order plans."

Of the fifty-two libraries which responded to the questionnaire, forty-nine are in the United States and three are in Canada. Forty-one of the forty-nine U.S. libraries reported that they were participants in the P.L. 480 program in some way, the extent of the participation ranging from receiving the English language material from one country to being full participants in all the programs (India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Nepal, Indonesia, Israel, U.A.R., and Yugoslavia).

There was a good deal of agreement as to the advantages to libraries of the P.L. 480 program. Nearly all of the participants mentioned one or more aspects of the following statement: the program allows libraries to get material which would otherwise be difficult or even impossible to get, to get it cheaply, to get it easily, and to get it quickly. In addition, several libraries mentioned the benefits of getting catalog cards with the books, or having them available from LC, and one library pointed out that the accessions lists constitute excellent (and in many cases the only) current national bibliographies for the various P.L. 480 countries.

There was less unanimity on the disadvantages of these programs, but there was no question as to the leading disadvantage: too much unwanted material, and just the sheer volume of the material, good

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and bad, creates enormous handling and storage problems. (It is interesting to note that three libraries which are participants only in one or more of the English-language programs complained about receiving too little material; none of the full participants in any of the programs registered this complaint, however.)

Additional disadvantages mentioned included the erratic nature of the shipping and the coverage, with the attendant uncertainty as to whether any specific title will be received. Coupled with this is the difficulty, if not impossibility, of claiming missing issues of periodicals. Stressed by several libraries was the danger of dependence on an artificial financial base, which can mean, among other things, serious gaps in serial runs if subscriptions have been cancelled with regular sources and the P.L. 480 program in a country collapses. One additional disadvantage mentioned was that there were no retrospective publications sent.

The "ayes" definitely outweighed the "nays" in the P.L. 480 Program replies. Only two full participants and two English-language participants indicated disadvantages without any compensating advantages, while ten libraries listed advantages with no offsetting disadvantages. Most important of all, perhaps, *no library indicated a desire to terminate or even limit its participation in any P.L. 480 program.*

Thirty of the responding libraries indicated that they had collecting responsibilities under the Farmington Plan, twenty-two did not, and in reply to the final question, which was, "In light of the broader acquisitions programs developed since the inception of the Farmington Plan (such as NPAC and P.L. 480), do you feel that the Plan as originally conceived continues to fill a national need?" twenty-two libraries said no, seventeen said yes, one said it did not know, and twelve did not comment. The division of these answers among Farmington participants and non-participants was rather interesting. Among the participants the "no's" (no, the Farmington Plan does not continue to fill a national need), led the "yes's" by a score of seventeen to eleven, with two not commenting. Among the non-participants, five said no, six said yes, one did not know, and ten did not comment. Thus half the non-participants had opinions about the need to continue the Farmington Plan, but these were split almost exactly evenly.

While many of the replies were simply unadorned "yes's" and "no's," a number of them included additional comments, particularly the "yes's," and the latter nearly all had to do with reservations about the



future of both NPAC and P.L. 480. The John Crerar Library put it this way: "P.L. 480 plans will never be comprehensive. NPAC has yet to prove that it will be a viable, long lived success story." Columbia said that "if we could feel certain that the government sponsored programs would continue and be properly funded so as to do an adequate job, we would give up the Farmington Plan. At this point, that assurance is lacking." Perhaps the most significant comment in this regard was this: "In view of current budgetary situation it seems unwise to discontinue any existing cooperative programs including Farmington." This was signed by Edmond L. Applebaum, Assistant Director for Acquisitions and Overseas Operations at the Library of Congress.

Some of the current trends in blanket orders and their implications for the acquisitions policies and procedures of all academic libraries may be summarized here. First, it seems very clear that dealer selection blanket order and approval plans are with us to stay, or at least as long as there is more money for books than there is for clerical and selection staff, and as long as some countries have such inadequate bibliographic information available to us that we simply cannot depend on it. Blanket orders do work. They do give us broader coverage, they do get books to us faster, they do get them to us with much less work on our part, they do enable us to select with book in hand in many cases, they do offer us the only possible means of getting any sort of coverage in many areas. These are powerful considerations, indeed, they are overriding considerations in many cases, and the proliferation of new plans attests to their effectiveness.

But what are we paying for these advantages? What are we giving up besides a lot of extra work in poring over bibliographies and typing countless individual orders? Perhaps nothing; perhaps the twelve libraries which listed only advantages for the blanket order and no disadvantages are right. But perhaps we are giving up, or are in danger of giving up, a great deal, in some cases even more than we are getting. A blanket order is a powerful tool; like any powerful tool it can be dangerous if it is not handled properly.

If we do not review the blanket order dealers' selections with precisely as much thought, discrimination, and professional expertise as we do the selections we initiate (and it should be much easier with the book in hand); if we accept *any* book just because it has been sent by the dealer, and not because it conforms to our idea of what should be in *our* collection; if we fail to maintain as close and regular

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contact with the bibliographic sources available to us for each area as we did before the blanket order, and if, as a result of this, we come to assume, either consciously or unconsciously, that what books the dealer has sent or what appears on any extra selection aids he supplies, such as printed cards or slips, represent the totality from which selection may be made, and if we stop looking beyond these; if we thus simply stop initiating orders, except for those titles supplied by the dealer (one library reported that "although they review the books coming in, they [the librarians] are told not to initiate orders for current books"); if we thus lose the flexibility to respond to the changing needs of our academic environment; then we *have* abdicated our responsibility and perhaps then we have paid too high a price for our wonderful, powerful, dangerous tool.

In some cases we have no choice, we must turn over some of our responsibility, but let us at least know we are doing it, know why we are doing it, and know the difference between doing it because we have to and doing it because it is simply a little more convenient.

UCLA has forty blanket order programs, the largest number of any library responding to the questionnaire, and perhaps the largest number in North America. We are deeply committed to this approach, and I for one am convinced that, given our present situation, the advantages decidedly outweigh the disadvantages. However, I hope we never become unaware, or even less aware, of the potential dangers inherent in this invaluable but insidious aid to effective book selection.