SCIENTIFIC PUBLISHING

Libraries Join Forces on Journal Prices

AMSTERDAM—Several Dutch libraries are banding together to try to hold down future price increases for scientific journals, and they may soon be joined by other European libraries. They are focusing their initial efforts on electronic journals.

The move was sparked by the imminent merger of the British-Dutch company Reed Elsevier—a leading publisher of scientific, professional, and business information—and one of its main rivals, the Dutch company Wolters Kluwer. The result will be the world's largest publisher of trade and academic journals, with total sales in 1996 of more than $6 billion. About one-sixth of these revenues were generated by highly profitable scientific and medical journals, of which Elsevier publishes some 1200 and Wolters Kluwer more than 300.

Journal giant. These two heavyweights of academic publishing are due to merge.

Scientific libraries in the Netherlands were swift to express their fear that the alliance, with an estimated market share of about 20% and a virtual monopoly in some scientific fields, could prompt another round of price increases. Over the past 10 years, scientific information has become ever more costly, with many subscription rates rising by more than 10% a year. "And Elsevier has been the trend setter," contends Alex Klugkist, chair of the UKB, a consultative body of 15 Dutch scientific libraries.

Fears about the merger crystallized longstanding concerns among librarians about rising journal prices. Fifteen days after the deal was made public, Dutch librarians announced plans to join forces in their negotiations with publishers. On 28 October, they took a first step by adopting a set of principles that will govern their future negotiations about electronic journals—a territory where they stand to gain most, as pricing policies in this sector of publishing are still taking shape. These "licensing principles" stipulate, for instance, that libraries that subscribe to the printed version of a journal should pay no more than an additional 7.5% to have access to it electronically as well. The libraries also say they will refuse to pay more than 80% of the paper rate to subscribe to the online version alone. They also promise to stand firm on so-called "noncancellation clauses" (an obligation to subscribe to a printed journal for several years).

Research libraries in eight German states were involved in drawing up these principles and are expected to sign them shortly. Klugkist hopes that many other European libraries will follow suit. Reactions supporting the Dutch initiative have poured in from all over the world, he says. Indeed, the Association of European Research Libraries will discuss collective action at its 1998 meeting, to be held next summer, and the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), a worldwide organization headquartered in The Hague, supports the Dutch-German initiative.

IFLA is also "concerned" about the Wolters Kluwer–Elsevier merger, says Secretary-General Jan Voogt, "because it may further erode the libraries' position." The organization is consulting lawyers to see whether a formal protest to the European Union's competition directorate would make sense. The Dutch Federation of Tax Consultants has already filed a protest in Brussels—Wolters Kluwer dominates Dutch legal and tax publishing—and European competition commissioner Karel van Miert says he will investigate the merger.

In a similar vein, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), an organization of 121 libraries in North America, is considering an appeal to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission. Whatever the outcome, the merger "doesn't bode well" for research libraries, says Mary Case, director of the ARL Office of Scholarly Communication. A study of pricing trends that her organization carried out shows that, compared to 1986, libraries are now spending 124% more to acquire 7% fewer titles.

Reed Elsevier declined to comment on its pricing policies. A Wolters Kluwer spokesperson told *Science* the merger would not lead to additional price rises for the company's science publications. But even if their immediate fears are unfounded, the libraries are expected to make the most of the momentum their joint declaration has generated. "We've been talking about a 'journal crisis' for years," says Klugkist. "It looks like it's finally arrived. We're fed up."

–Martin Enserink

Martin Enserink is a writer in Amsterdam.

WOMEN'S HEALTH RESEARCH

A 5-Year Initiative Slowly Takes Shape

Women's health research is moving "away from the insularity" that characterized it during the early 1990s, says cardiovascular specialist Marianne Legato, who spoke last week at a huge planning session on women's health—part of an effort sponsored by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to draft a 5-year agenda for the field. Research is "moving out of the pelvis," as she said—focusing less on anatomy and the reproductive system and more on gender-based differences at the cellular and molecular level. This shift in emphasis, Legato and others argue, could broaden support for women's health research. For example, Legato said, researchers are learning how important hormones are in controlling the development of the brain and other organs—insights they have gained partly by examining how women differ from men. But the results are likely to help men as much as women.

Legato, who heads a women's health project at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York, is co-chair of a large task force that's trying to establish priorities for women's health research. The panelists, mostly female leaders of 31 research and advocacy groups, are reviewing presentations given at four meetings sponsored by NIH's Office of Research on Women's Health (ORWH). The results will be passed along to NIH chiefs and members of Congress. Although the report won't be finished for a year, NIH's Donna Dean, Legato's co-chair, said the lessons learned from this advisory process may affect NIH decisions before then. For example, she said NIH may be ready to fund an initiative on autoimmune disorders inspired in part by pressure to act on lupus, which is far more likely to strike women than men. And one institute is planning to fund new obstetrics and gynecology research centers.

Last week's review was the final session in a yearlong series of meetings held around the country by ORWH director Vivian Pinn. At a press conference on 19 November, Pinn said the aim is to examine what's been accomplished in the 7 years since ORWH was created and to consider "priorities and scientific directives ... as we move toward the year 2000." The gathering also served to raise the visibility of Pinn's office: It drew one Cabinet member—Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala—and three members of Congress.

Writing up the recommendations from this exercise won't be easy. A draft list of top priorities discussed at last week's meeting was so long the items were categorized under 25 major headings. The job of sifting wheat from chaff now falls to Legato and Dean.

–Eliot Marshall