

Re: Bringing out-of-print math books into print

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On Apr 15, 12:24 pm, tc...@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx wrote:

On several occasions I have had the following experience. There is some math book that I consult frequently enough that I decide it would be nice to have a copy. The book is out of print. I search the web and find that used copies are selling at exorbitant prices, or sometimes are not available at all. I am sure that many others have had similar experiences.

On occasion I have tried to go further. I have contacted Dover Press or the AMS to try to get them interested in bringing the book back into print. Dover has always ignored me or filtered me out with a boilerplate response. The AMS has been better, but is often at a loss to know whether it should take the financial risk. An additional complication is that sometimes the author of the book has unwittingly signed over the rights to the original publisher, who does not want to relinquish the rights but also does not want to bring the book back into print.

It occurs to me that one way to help address this problem would be to create a website or Wiki where consumers of math books could "vote" for which books they would like to see come back into print. Anyone could propose a book, or add their support to a book that someone else has proposed. Although imperfect, the website would be a useful source of information to publishers such as the AMS that would be better than what they have now. (For example, I recently tried to persuade them to reprint Dominic Welsh's "Matroid Theory." Their only method of assessing demand was to ask a few experts for their personal opinions. The experts said, without any supporting evidence, that matroid theory is not very active, and that the existence of Oxley's book means that nobody wants to buy Welsh's book. When I responded with (1) statistics from MathSciNet showing that matroid theory is thriving; (2) high prices for Welsh's book on bookfinder.com, demonstrating demand; (3) quotes from Oxley's introduction, praising Welsh's book and saying that Oxley's book did not supersede Welsh's; (4) the relatively high sales rank of Lawler's matroid theory book, recently brought back into print by Dover; they were surprised. It had not occurred to them to seek out such information about the potential demand for the book.)

Unfortunately, I personally don't have the technical expertise to set up such

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a website, but surely other readers of this newsgroup do. If you think this is a good idea and are willing to set up at least a prototype website, then please post the link to this newsgroup.

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The range of our projectiles---even ... the artillery---however great, will never exceed four of those miles of which as many thousand separate us from the center of the earth. ---Galileo, Dialogues Concerning Two New Sciences

Setting up a web site to elicit suggestions for bringing a work back into print, and for accumulating data in support of doing so is a useful, but probably not very effective step. The facts are: (1) mathematics books, for typographical reasons in particular, are time-consuming and difficult to prepare for print, and even with the best OCR software available, would produce text of sometimes marginal quality (take a look at some of the products in Kessinger Publishing's Rare Reprints); (2) the mathematics book market is comparatively limited (considering that even the AMS has to ask about the cost-effectiveness of producing titles); and (3) it is uncertain how to establish and maintain participation in a web site to recommend and vote for the reprinting of titles, without enthusiastic support for such a project, and, in any case, the data collected from such a web site is likely to be essentially anecdotal and unconvincing to publishers.

An alternative, or perhaps supplementary, route to creation of a "want" list web site would be for those willing and able to participate to put together something like the Gutenberg e-book project. This would require a core of volunteers who would be willing to check on the copyright status of proposed titles, to scan books into an electronic data base, serve as proofreaders and editors to ensure that the electronic texts produced were accurate in respect to typography, etc., to organize the volunteers who would work on these projects, to establish, organize, and maintain a host site for storage and retrieval of the titles so produced. It seems that this kind of on-going project would take a big commitment of time and work on the part of organizers and volunteers, and perhaps the financial backing of institutions and individuals to help acquire material for reprinting and to finance a host computer and associated website and the equipment, hardware and software, required to make the project feasible.

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