

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

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I wonder if this whole question will be obsolete in five years, precisely because people like Tim Chow are beginning to write things like this and technology is evolving. You won't contact a publisher to ask them to bring it into print; you'll just place your order electronically and it will get printed to order and shipped without the conscious attention of anyone besides you. -- Mike Hardy

tchow@xxxxxxxxxxxxx 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,

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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 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.

Tim Chow

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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