

AUTHORS OF ADVANCED TEXTBOOKS WANTED

(Work Pays Less Than Minimum Wage)

By Melvin L. DeFleur

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There has been a lot of discussion in the TAA newsletter about the problem of selling complimentary copies. That certainly does represent a loss of revenue for both publisher and author. However, there is another potentially more serious problem of a different nature that is being brought about by the chain book stores who have streamlined the sale of used copies to a remarkable degree. Their efforts are going to reduce the quality of books available, particularly those prepared for advanced courses and graduate students. This unhappy effect can be illustrated by the case history set forth below:

l am an experienced author who has several very successful texts, and I hold an endowed chair in a large private university. Thus, I am no novice and have considerable recognition in my field. As part of my teaching agreements, I recently taught an advanced seminar designed for doctoral students. As it turned out, five students signed up. One of the books assigned was my own work on advanced theories in my subject, which was written specifically for advanced students. With no intention of blowing my own horn, it is a book that is used world-wide and has become something of a "classic" in its field. It is now in its fifth edition, and it has been translated into Spanish, Portuguese, Maylayan, and recently into Chinese. Although its total readership is not large, I receive frequent correspondence about the book from students in many countries.

The purpose of this small essay is not to extoll the virtues of the book, but to provide an account of the

impact that the used book sales are having on this particular category of work. Frankly, I have never made much money from my particular book. I did not expect to. There are not that many students in advanced work, as compared to those in undergraduate courses. More important is the trend that I have seen in which the amount of royalties I have received with each new revision has been declining, although first-year sales after each new edition have been increasing slightly. Furthermore, I know from publisher's records that more schools now use the book than earlier. Clearly, used books have reduced both the publisher's profits and my rewards. That kind of trend is already well-understood.

What I want to point out is a different and more important consequence. It began to be clear to me when I asked the students in my seminar if they were able to get the fifth edition of the book, which had been out only about three months. They all said they had. I found out, however, that all five were used copies that had been shipped from a school in California where it was used during the summer, to ours in New York for the beginning of the Fall term. I was simply stunned. I couldn't believe the level of efficiency of the book store system that can identify what is being taught in an obscure seminar at one end of the country and get even a handful of used books there in a matter of days from the other end of the country.

The important consequence that is not obvious is this: At the precise moment when I learned how efficient used book distribution has