A Springer employee recently recalled an incident during her time as a librarian at a large American technology company. A scientist had come to her looking for the original research – written by a Nobel Prize winner, no less – that was cited in something he had read. After an exhaustive search, the librarian discovered that the original study was nowhere to be found. The original work existed only in a few precious print copies, none of which were accessible. The scientist, astonished that such important work was completely out of reach, had to resign himself to the fact that he would likely never be able to review the original material.

This is a story any seasoned librarian, researcher or author can tell. Dead-end citations and out-of-print texts are common pitfalls of modern research, but ones that Springer was determined to bridge. This was the goal of the digitization efforts to create the Springer Book Archives (SBA). One of the most complex and intensive parts of the story was to find and get in touch with thousands of authors.

The story begins in 2010 when the decision was made to digitize all of the books Springer had published, dating back to the 1840s. With contemporary journal content already available online, the company decided in 2005 that all books going forward would be offered digitally. In 2004 Springer had successfully digitized all of its journal content in its Online Journal Archives (OJA), but the wealth of Springer content in books printed prior to 2005, sitting in warehouses and libraries across continents, was surely worth preserving and making available again in perpetuity. It seemed easy enough, but the search for authors and their heirs quickly turned into a complex endeavor.

To begin, a team to oversee the process of tracking down rights holders was set up. The plan was a four-pronged approach:
1) Contacting authors and rights holders to solicit feedback and tackle questions;
2) scanning all of its historic book contracts;
3) setting up a method for reporting on progress; and
4) establishing a system by which titles could be retracted from the archives should that need arise.
Finding and contacting authors would prove to be the most challenging piece to the puzzle, and the plan was to combine direct marketing efforts with outreach to the academic community. Springer could use its current international communications channels to known authors, and leverage existing relevant scientific community listservs, societies and other partners to find those out of reach. Finally, with hundreds of employees whose work put them in contact with authors daily, there was an army of internal standard bearers to help aid in the author search.

And if the approach was multi-faceted, the tactics employed to reach rights holders only echoed the wide breadth of the effort. Springer created a dedicated webpage for authors as a window into the SBA project. Here a wealth of information was made available to authors, including a provisional book title list, a frequently-asked-questions section, online forms and contact information. Possible rights holders were (and are still) driven here by personal emails and physical mailings, features and inserts in Springer’s newsletters, online banner ads, social media channels, conference handouts and print ads. A dedicated SBA author helpdesk was also offered in both English and German. By the end of June 2013 more than 100,000 emails or physical letters were mailed to authors and rights holders, both of which continue today as more titles are added.

As with any major project, reporting would be a crucial part of the job to make sure that the work was being done thoroughly and efficiently. An additional database was established to track all contract information for the titles that would be included, as well as author feedback as it came in through both on- and offline channels.

Finally, to close the loop on the clearing process, Springer also established a way that titles would be taken out of the archives, and off the market, if needed.

Before the SBA, a digitization project of this magnitude had never been done. And because of this, neither had an author search with so many working parts, and such meticulous attention to detail. This rigor and focus on both quality and accuracy makes everyone involved in the SBA – from Production, to Marketing, Sales and Editorial – incredibly proud to have been a part of this historic, ground-breaking endeavor.

And to one Springer professional – a former librarian – the completion of the SBA has brought much-needed closure to a fruitless search for original research that began many years ago.

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