

Current Issues Paper: Electronic Journals
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Introduction

Since the late 1990s, budgetary growth has been a common problem that has faced many libraries. This had been the era of stagnated budgets that have forced libraries to make difficult decisions to stretch their available capital. In academic libraries, the problem has been magnified by purchases for the library collection. The expenditures for monographs have steadily decreased; the cost for serials has increased dramatically. Indeed, as the cost of journals has continued to rise, library budgets have struggled to keep up with pricing models from publishers and escalating inflation rates. Libraries had to contend not only with the demand to add new serial acquisitions but also the ongoing expenses essential for continuing existing subscriptions. At the same time, demands for the instant access to all available resources have come from students and faculty as they address their respective research needs. The solution to these issues arrived in the form of electronic journals.

Environment

Print journals have been the one of the stalwart resources within library collections, but they were bound by the primary limitation of being a physical resource: a single user could access one issue of a journal at any moment, always during library hours. The advent of electronic journals into the academic environment has introduced a new method for academic libraries to expand their services in order to provide current information sources for its patrons. The goal to improve services has always been a constant attribute of these libraries, as they attempt to provide a positive result on the use of its materials, both in terms of actual use and the elements that affect its use (King,

Boyce, & Montgomery, 2003). Electronic journals represented a transformative development for library services, as new possibilities for users could now be explored.

There were several advantages of electronic journals over their print counterparts. Keyword searching could be utilized to search across issues within a particular journal or several different journal titles, the index and table of contents could be browsed, and links provided access to articles in a full-text format as well as the growing digitized format (Salisbury, Vaughn, & Bajwa, 2004). Users indicated additional advantages such as speed of access, remote access, ease of use, reliability, ease of printing, availability of back issues, and a user-friendly interface (Salisbury et al., 2004). In this new landscape, libraries have had to reevaluate their standing collection management strategies to incorporate electronic journals into their resources (Salisbury et al., 2004). Moreover, new strategies needed to be incorporated in order to decide between the two formats.

Participation and Criteria

Input from a variety of sources had always been a crucial component in the serials review process. Like any other undertaking of this scope, approval from library administration should be considered a crucial element. Contributions from faculty were one factor, since the curriculum of departments determined the type of journals that would be part of a library collection (Siebenberg, Galbraith, & Brady, 2004). Usage statistics were also valuable, as they determined which subscriptions could be continued from year to year (King et al., 2003). When it came to acquiring electronic journals, however, these information sources were expanded. Library selectors, charged with taking an active role with academic departments, arranged meetings with faculty to discuss which format should be the preferred means of access- would an electronic

journal be the preferred means of access, or would the print journal continue to serve that role (Campbell, 2003). In addition, readership surveys offered perspectives from users about which resources they would prefer continue in print and those they prefer in an electronic format (King et al., 2003). These surveys were a tool to manage the assumption that patrons would be able to shift to electronic journals as the libraries were planning to do (Siebenberg et al., 2004). Once the results had been gathered, libraries could generate a set of necessary criteria that could be used when planning the necessary steps that needed to be taken with publishers and/ or vendors to provide access.

Sustainable access was the one of the main components of building a set of criteria for academic libraries to consider electronic journals. As libraries began to move away from print journals, certain assurances had to be made that electronic journals would offer the same measure of access. This required a license agreement that covered specific conditions; without it, expectations on the part of the library may not be considered (Walters, 2004). These expectations have included: retention rights which cover the length of an electronic journal subscription even when that journal is cancelled; permanent access to cover any backfiles and archives that were purchased; completeness of the text, images, graphs, and other primary content within any issue; reliable access from static URLs, response times and back-up servers; and the appearance of an online journal at the same time its print counterpart is available (Walters, 2004). Other provisions that have been included within license agreements have been ILL permissions, compulsory paper subscriptions to access the online versions, restricted access, and specific content that may not be accessible in the electronic format (Campbell, 2003). Also, a cost-benefit analysis can hold particular importance: although the process for

adding a print journal has been long defined, there is still an expense in terms of the staff, systems and time needed to move one issue of a journal from the mail room to a library shelf (King et al., 2003). While there was no physical item involved in processing an issue of an electronic journal, the costs of making that journal accessible to patrons was just as significant. The framework to provide access required initial expenses related to training for staff and hardware/software requirements for systems to operate smoothly.

Types of purchases

There were three available methods for libraries to subscribe to electronic journals: individually, aggregators, and full text databases (King et al., 2003). Libraries that chose to subscribe to journals on an individual basis were able to maintain their subscriptions as they had in a print environment: one title, one specific price.

Aggregators, such as JSTOR or Project Muse, could offer collections of journals around a specific subject area and offer pricing accordingly; however, libraries could only add titles and not subtract the ones that were not needed. Full text databases offered even more flexibility as libraries were able to add and drop titles as needed, as well as acquire additional subscriptions that may not have been part of the collection previously.

The growing range of purchasing options presented a unique opportunity for journal publishers: they could offer packages to their clients that encouraged a transition toward electronic-only subscriptions. Publishers began to offer “print+online” subscriptions and deep discount pricing arrangements that allowed customers to try an online version while continuing to receive print issues (Stange, 2006). It was the advent of the “Big Deal” that provided the greatest leverage for publishers: a package of titles

could be offered at a price that was based in part on the cost of a print subscription (Stange, 2006).

Advantages

The immediate benefits for libraries to receive electronic journals were instantly recognized. Journals could be accessed by patrons anywhere at any time, and this access has led to a greater shift in the area of research. Users became more comfortable reading and printing journals from online sources as the quality for reproducing journals improved (Brady, McCord, & Galbraith, 2006). Students were more receptive to this new atmosphere in the beginning, but faculty even adopted electronic journals into the curriculum over time (Siebenberg et al., 2004).

Cooperation among libraries took a new direction in terms of electronic journals. Libraries began to form consortia in order to specifically address the pricing and impact of electronic journals (King et al., 2003). Consortia became invaluable as libraries negotiated site licenses and specific the terms of journal packages. Conversely, consortia brought their collective influence to publishers to honor specific terms within a contract, such as providing long term and permanent access to journals (Walters, 2004). In essence, the publishers were bound to their new role as content providers as well as content distributors.

The input of user surveys, usage statistics and faculty input gave libraries an opportunity to evaluate its subscriptions not only in terms of print and electronic formats, but also whether a subscription should continue to be received in any format (King et al., 2003). As a library reviews its subscriptions, it can not only conclude whether or not a title should be included or phased out, but it can also evaluate whether a specific package

should remain in its current form, upgraded or discontinued altogether. Electronic journals have begun to assume the aspect of permanence held by their print counterparts, no longer restricted by the designation of supplementary resources (Walters, 2004).

Disadvantages

As previously discussed, the benefits of library consortia can be strong in terms of purchasing power and influence. On the other hand, the drawbacks can also be measured as the downside of the “Big Deal” on library collections (Peters, 2001). Libraries could no longer provide for the individual needs of its users, as collection use could no longer be gauged by exact usage data. Libraries also gave up a level of content management as the selection of content at the title level had been placed with external agencies. Further, purchases by consortia could lead collections to become more homogenous amongst its participants, leading to unique aspects to be reduced.

Another potential drawback of the nature of these packages has been the issues of ownership and access rights (Walters, 2004). The automatic designation of print journals as permanent resource has led to similar expectations of electronic journals. This guarantee, as previously noted, must be elaborated specifically in the agreements that a library has entered. Further, there are concerns related to interlibrary loan, link resolvers and electronic journal access, access to backfiles from remote locations, “citation half lives” for different disciplines, the number of times an article is accessed electronically versus printing a hardcopy, and the usage of print materials that were not “born digital” (Brady et al., 2006).

It has been the acceptance of electronic resources that has led to two concerns from the faculty. Depending upon the discipline, faculty members have been reluctant to

embrace the electronic journal completely: faculty from the scientific, technological and medical fields have been more eager to use electronic resources than their counterparts in the humanities (Brady et al., 2006). Also, the tendency of students to rely solely on electronic journals versus their print counterparts has caused these faculty to design their courses to take advantage of both resources (Siebenberg et al., 2004). In this manner, they encourage students to view the best that both type resources have to offer in terms of beginning their research and refining it toward a specific topic.

Summary and Conclusions

The incorporation of electronic resources into academic libraries has led to a fundamental shift in the manner and methods of conducting research. The appeal of functionality to access specific articles can no longer be ignored, and the desire to access materials from any location is an invaluable prospect. To that end, however, the decision for libraries to take this particular direction cannot be made in a vacuum in order for it to achieve the desired effect to patrons. A variety of sources must lend their support, the necessary underpinnings of staff and systems must be in place, and a plan for selection and purchasing should have been approved. The transition from print journals to their electronic counterparts has operated more efficiently when these points have been taken into consideration.

At the same time, the questions of moving from print journals to electronic journals have caused libraries to review their primary mission. In order to serve their patrons, libraries must be capable of evolving to keep up with a changing environment of information. These changes should never be feared and dismissed, because the needs of the users would not be served. Instead, changes should be viewed as a challenge for

growth, as libraries have incorporated these new ideas and move beyond the concept of information storehouses toward information brokers.

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