NEW SYSTEM NEW RULES: DEVELOPMENT AND TRENDS IN SERIALS SUBSCRIPTIONS

by
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Abstrak

So far, subscription agents have been in the middle of journals acquisition. With the rapidly growing technological advancement and more and more publishers tend to deliver electronic journals direct to the libraries, and other end-users, the relationship that subscription agents have with the publishers and libraries is now changing, and thus the part of each players is gradually being redefined. This article explores what do subscription agents themselves would like to think about the future of their role.

1. Background

1.1 The purpose of a library is to acquire information, organize it, make it available and preserve it. This has been its significant, distinctive and successful role with printed and non-printed materials for the past several hundred years. It is not simply a network of databases, nor a building full of books, but an organization with a set of information organized for long-term use. Nowadays, many public, college and university libraries are trying to provide an increasing volume of electronic information for their clientele, especially since more and more science and technology journals are being delivered digitally. Digital publications seem to exert an irresistible attraction. Public discussions are now mainly about digital subscriptions, digital libraries, Internet, CD-ROM, databases and the WWW. No one wants to be left out of something hailed as being as important to the future as highways were in the past. This craze for electronic information is due to the need for fast response and cost-effective solutions, for control of information and for remote access by users. As a result, the virtual library is now a regular topic of discussion at almost every library conference. Some claim that the all-digital future is just around the corner, ready to sweep away all traditional media in a grand, enlightening convergence. They also suggest that recent developments in digital library hold the promise of transforming traditional libraries into interactive centers of learning and research by virtue of inexpensive digital storage, easy-to-use search engines and powerful computing hardware. How probable is this? No doubt, IT is transforming many things, but there has been little progress in developing a truly digital library, largely because of copyright problems. Much of the desired information for any digital library is not in the public domain. Negotiating with every single copyright owner before any work can be made electronically available is not an easy task. It is difficult to predict if new solutions will make the digital library a reality. Hopefully, any transformation of libraries into digital centers of information will not mean that the libraries will lose their traditional role of providing information without economic or any other bias.

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1.2 This paper on digital subscriptions provides my personal viewpoints after having worked as a serials librarian in the past and also after having made use of such collections as a researcher. Serials collections in most university libraries are undergoing profound changes due to sources becoming more and more digital and less and less printed. In the process, there are several areas of concern: Are electronic materials transitory? Is an electronic subscription a buyer’s or a seller’s market? Is an electronic subscription worth the time and expense? Is it not an expensive, uncharted and difficult task? Is cataloguing necessary? What is the life span of digital media? How do we ensure intellectual preservation beyond the preservation of the media and the subscription valid period? Are digital reading and storage devices omnipresent? Can digital distribution replace print publishing for all new materials? Can reading from digital devices be as comfortable, effective and fast as reading from printed materials? Can a library make a single purchase of digital materials and have them simultaneously available throughout the university? How are library collections and their purposes changing as the emerging paradigm of collection development evolves? To what extent do the organizational structures of libraries need to change in order to work optimally with the emerging paradigm? How do we establish standards for the number of repository locations necessary to assure long-term existence of specific electronic information and access to it? How do we assure longevity and provide multiple permanent copies of electronic information? These are only some issues that cannot be ignored, no matter how enticing digital subscriptions may initially sound. The underlying reason for this is simple. Human beings are not machines and do not respond mechanically, while the advantages of digital materials are primarily mechanical. Researchers will, for instance, continue to demand information reliably locatable, as is the case when materials are placed in the traditional library’s care. They expect integrity of information whether the material comes in printed or digital formats such as in computer files, CD-ROM, databases, off-line and online. They expect to get what they are looking for whenever they go personally to the library or on to the Net. In theory, digital information is promptly retrievable. But, can it be so all the time? Can all access points be clear and accurate? Unprecedented pressure is thus placed on librarians to provide a wide range of information almost instantly.

1.3 Since the beginning of the 1990s, Elsevier Science has explored new ways to develop digital libraries. Following its successes, more publishers in the sci-tech arena have strived to deliver their journals electronically, either via e-mail or on Websites. They have discovered that a switch to electronic media significantly lowers the cost of production, editing and composition by as much as a third of the cost! Though electronic publishing is an attractive option for publishers for many reasons, Mackie-Mason & Jankovich (1997:284) argue that introducing electronic publishing into the print industry raises the usual problems of a new business: new investments with uncertain revenues and new prototype testing for customers to discover the final value-added products. Thus, many small publishers are reluctant to deliver their journals digitally. Nevertheless, IT has transformed the ways libraries and librarians work. Networks link millions of bibliographic records. Books and journals, once the heart of any decent library, are being replaced by workstations, wired, interconnected and programmed into a global digital community. The organization of libraries is changing with digital information increasingly becoming part of their charge. Most libraries now have substantial systems departments. Some libraries separate the responsibility for electronic information from...
that for print. Indeed, digital publication has caused changes in the various roles of publishers, vendors and libraries. In the past, libraries were well organized to deal with the purchase and maintenance of tangible information sources. The publishers, the vendors and the librarians understood their functions and the materials flowed from selection through order and receipt into cataloguing and finally to the shelves. The advent of electronic publications has necessitated change in these familiar workflows and business relationships (Mouw 1998: 15). New information systems now need to be constructed to facilitate the use of electronic journals.

2. Digital Subscriptions: Legal And Technical Problems

2.1 The emergence of electronic journals has had a profound effect on publishers, vendors, librarians and end-users. Everyone in the information chain, from the authors to the producers to the ultimate users, find themselves attempting to adjust to new realities that were unthinkable only a few years ago. Among new uncertainties and challenges are the following:

a. Traditionally, libraries are responsible for purchasing materials, maintaining contact with faculty members and monitoring the use of collections. The maintenance of journals, for instance, following their reception, is mainly binding, preservation, shelving and re-shelving to ensure that they can be located. In the electronic environment, the traditional print practice of ownership through purchase is replaced by access through license. Instead of binding and shelving, librarians have to know copyright law, performance standards, usability of search and access software, access control (IP address) levels, passwords, concurrent users, analyses of varying search engines and interfaces, network technology and negotiating skill. This means the tasks of librarians have become more complex.

b. Though a license agreement is a legal contract, negotiating such a legal contract for electronic subscriptions with publishers is less straightforward than purchasing a print subscription. Librarians must negotiate licenses that address institutional needs and recognize obligations to the licensor. Librarians now need to ask some hard questions about the real value added to the information by the current convoluted licensing process. Licenses can be simple or complicated. They essentially spell out in detail what the product is, how much access costs and for how long, where it can be used and specifically instruct the purchaser not to copy and distribute the material for commercial purposes. Librarians need to be sure that their interests and that of their users are protected. They need to be aware of cases where licensing agreements may restrict their legal rights and those of their users.

c. In the past, the purchase and use of journals in libraries were determined by the libraries. This is now governed by license agreements that specify authorized use, authorized user, the charge per view, and authentication and archiving. The negotiating strength of libraries where restrictive license clauses are concerned is often weak.

d. In an electronic collection, hundreds of documents are grouped and sold together. This represents a drastic change from the single title selection process. Responsibility for this may lie in the chaotic climate surrounding collection development and the high expense may be the result of this. The purchase of a package of titles brings with it a host of problems. Many titles are included which are “unwanted” though they may be related. Librarians have a hard time prioritizing the issues and questions related to the topic.
Furthermore, it is difficult to determine a good balance of coverage when a database package is being purchased. Libraries will also have difficulties monitoring databases, analyzing coverage relative to academic programs, and determining the budget allocation for specific disciplines. One should ask if we are not riding the crest of chaos created by full-text and package deals. Indeed, we need to know to what extent the purchase of individual articles from e-journals can be supported by contemporary technology.

e. Most libraries in traditional environments have little interaction with publishers. They are only known as subscribers in publisher databases. The real interaction is between the libraries and vendors through routine channels of communication. The latter maintain a list of orders, renewing subscriptions as scheduled and passing through claims for non-receipt materials to publishers. Many publishers prefer this model and would rather not work directly with individual libraries (Mouw 1998: 19). In recognition of services provided by vendors, many publishers offer them discounts. It is these that have allowed vendors to maintain fairly low service charges to libraries. Nowadays, these relationships are changing. In their uncertainty, publishers are looking to deal directly with libraries, seeking advice from the latter on access and pricing models, negotiating license agreements, setting up and maintaining access mechanisms and collecting payment themselves, keeping the traditional middleman role to a minimum.

f. The number of variables associated with digital materials is much higher than that of printed materials. The ease of use of digital materials has caused database owners to place tight restrictions on database use and enforce previously unheard of restrictions on the use of the materials, such as per use, per user, per year, per title and per title grouping. Variations in these types of access have caused chaos in a library’s ability to account for material expenditures.

g. Another headache and uncertainty surrounding digital subscription is that libraries lose all access to journals on cancellation of subscription. Some guarantee must be secured for libraries that they will continue to be able to access the older data for which they have paid, even after a later subscription cancellation. This is another important issue in the long-term collection development of electronic materials. Cancellation of subscription has never posed a problem where access to purchased printed materials was concerned. Also there are no “repeated sales” of printed materials. With increasing demand for digital materials and decreasing budgets, cost reduction becomes an urgent matter. It is unclear to what extent IT will reduce costs. Is electronic publishing opening new ways of getting more service for the same amount of money? It is difficult to give a clear and convincing answer. Many librarians and scholars are pessimistic and argue that they have a lot more to lose than gain in the long run. Unlike print subscription, there are far too many unknowns and uncertainties in digital subscriptions. Most people expect licensing issues to have been settled. But, they are not! Thus, Henderson (1998: 57) comments that the ticket to the new frontier comes with a price for everyone.

2.2 Can vendors offer libraries any help now when publishers come directly to libraries to offer special packages for multiple titles or interim purchase agreements? Can they assist with license negotiations by explaining the meaning of terms or clauses, by performing some level of negotiations, by offering technical support for the use of a system and by helping to ensure that the libraries’ connections to publishers are secure? Traditionally, libraries have seen vendors as intermediaries between them and publishers, providing a valuable service by consolidating
subscriptions with many publishers. They also deal with publishers on all matters related to the providing of materials. They make it easy for libraries to manage large title lists effectively. They enjoy the libraries’ loyalty because of their in-depth knowledge of individual library requirements. In short, libraries use vendors to reduce to manageable proportions the numbers of publications from which they have to choose. If traditional vendors cannot play an effective role and negotiate directly with publishers and libraries where digital subscriptions are concerned, they will soon be eliminated.

2.3 Vendors must find new roles for themselves in the electronic age. They can act as brokers between libraries and publishers in negotiating license agreements, for example. They can be expected to introduce new services that offer access to electronic publications, by aggregating the titles from different publishers into a consolidated package. They may play an important role in supporting a wider adoption of electronic journals by libraries, or develop new delivery systems to support library efforts to manage their growing electronic collections. These systems are important in integrating electronic journals with other media and delivery units, such as reference, resource sharing and cataloging. All this would contribute to a dream digital library.

3. Collection Development, Maintenance And Accessibility

3.1 Collection maintenance is critical to a library’s ability to deliver quality services to users whose needs have always been the foundation on which libraries build their collection. Collection development focuses on creating collections and providing access mechanisms, and with the advent of digital materials is now undergoing profound changes. The receiving process has also radically changed since there are no longer actual pieces to receive. So far, traditional libraries have been very successful in developing such practices as creating unified collections, distinguishing ephemera in special collections from other items and providing access methods via indices and catalogues as well as maintaining collections by binding. One could argue that many core library activities such as circulation, technical services and even shelving are for maintaining access to its collection over time. With electronic resources, libraries do not own any individual issues in the traditional sense. Thus, the traditional activities of binding, shelving, re-shelving and repair have been replaced by a new set of duties. Someone must keep an eye on the products, watching for changes, staying alert to new access restrictions or requirements, and monitoring different access options and different purchasing opportunities. The immediate concern, as highlighted by Persons (1998:60), is how librarians are to evaluate the effect of this technological change on a library’s collection and its ability to fulfill its goals. Do they already possess the required maintenance methods for digital materials? Is the maintenance of collections that include dynamic and informal information possible only with new technical solutions? Can we modify traditional methods to handle these requirements? Collection development is likely to be a significant problem with digital materials in the future.

3.2 To understand the issues better and to be prepared for the new environment, it is necessary to know the practices used in the past and the present. The development of electronic collection reflects the development of new tools, management skills, options and expectations. How many of the tools that support these efforts are rooted in print practice? Are we not exploring new choices by eliminating old ones? We therefore ask: What will be required to maintain continued access to digital materials? Have hypertext and computer science communities no
traditions and practices relevant to the broadly-constructed databases? Answers to the above questions will be institutional and technical. A good mix, however, will depend on the types of collection desired as well as the potential control mechanisms for them. At a glance, current practices in serials management include the following:

a. In a traditional paper-based library, we have considerable control over a collection. First of all, print publications are stable and are physically self-contained. Thus, we can decide what to move and to where. Maintenance of such a collection is within the purview of librarians. Thus, many universities have separate faculty libraries, with a central library containing materials of general interest. One of the advantages is that users can browse through the collection and discover materials other than the one they were initially seeking. With digital materials, browsing and the personal contact users used to have with librarians are gone. The question is: Can systems librarians focus on technological advancement and leave availability of data to the users? How many are qualified as knowledgeable end users?

b. With print materials, after they are acquired, libraries suffer no additional costs no matter how often the materials are used. There is no link between subscription cost and usage. Users consider the availability of a journal to be free of charge. Once a library subscribes to a journal, the library may lend it out over and over again, with no further payment required. We had supposed that digitized materials would improve things, with many reading and using a single item simultaneously. Sadly, it does not work that way. The use of digital resources in libraries is strictly pay-per-view, with libraries essentially serving as distributors for the publishers.

c. Traditionally, libraries possess permanent rights to retain the materials received. So, if they cancel a subscription, they are allowed to continue providing users with previously received materials. This is not the case when libraries cancel digital subscriptions.

d. Another obvious advantage with print sources is that they do not malfunction. We can use them in a variety of locations without having to consider power supply, network connections and similar technical issues.

3.3 What then are the strengths and weaknesses of digital materials? Basically, they are the following:

a. Libraries buying digital materials need to find new technical maintenance mechanisms. We have control only over the selection of pointers to URLs that provide the capability for the extended collection. Access to a collection needs official approval from database providers. Without institutional control, each individual using the collection must deal with maintenance issues himself. This is unfair and also a growing problem following the emergence of a wide variety of end-users. Some are highly adept at using electronic resources, while others require a great deal of personal assistance. There is always a number of readers who have failed to install the needed software or who have not picked up the passwords they need.

b. Databases are replete with challenges, problems and options. Only a certain percentage of databases are truly full text. Worse yet, titles that are full text tend to come from less scholarly journals. Small publishers are reluctant to invest because they are unclear about whether or not such an investment will pay off. We expect competition to lead to more and more journals having full-text image. This requires cooperation between publishers. The storage of scanned articles is impossible without the consent of copyright holders. However, if the library is to remain true to
its mission, a certain proportion of scholarly content must be assured.

c. As mentioned, the major issue with digital materials is their impermanence, despite their advantage of being more current. In order for us to be able to seek out the same materials later, they must be captured in some permanent form. The lack of confidence regarding the lifespan of digital contents makes it difficult to cancel print versions of titles that may now be digitally available for purchase. The purchase of a package of databases is a big challenge to libraries.

d. Continuous training of librarians and users in handling technological changes is required. The former must at the least be able to anticipate the demands and needs of the latter. Librarians must be able to handle the proliferation of tasks involving not only professional skills but also an ever greater portion of their time.

e. Pricing, licensing and pay-per-use continuously reappear, pushing serials costs skywards, instead of bringing them down. However, there are genuine savings to be made in time and effort because digital publications allow for compact storage of large quantities of information. They also allow for data manipulation in ways that are not cost-effective in other formats. They allow free text and Boolean searching. Downloading information from electronic resources to a user’s computer allows the user to cut, paste, move, add and delete as much as he desires. Such capabilities make electronic information the preferred information format for many users.

f. Although digital publications offer easier navigation, reading from digital devices, whether portable or desktop, are inferior in several ways. These are mainly associated with the monitor itself, including factors such as light, resolution, speed and impact. Nor is it always easy to read from a computer. This does not seem to be improving. Human preference for reading print rather than the computer screen is hard to change.

g. Information will become available 24 hours a day. Materials are never at the bindery, stolen or unavailable for some other reason. In today’s digital world, we can retrieve stored data, browse it and re-use it, all without leaving the office.

h. With connections to the Internet, the library is no longer the only source of information, but merely one of many resources available on the WWW. The packages present an opportunity for libraries to provide access to more materials than they can realistically expect to house and acquire. Similarly, users like to access a giant repository of digital information by merely submitting a search and then walking away happy with the information they find. More and more researchers are interested in seamless ways for information to be accessed, using already acquired, implemented and familiar information systems. Here, speed of access and delivery, printing, and efficiency of search and retrieval seem to overshadow problems associated with archival and less frequently used materials.

i. In an electronic environment, it is easy to associate service costs with individual customers. There are all in all a greater variety of costs, such as charge-per-page, pre-screen viewing, connection time, printing, copyright and royalties. It is possible to pass the charges on to the customers.

j. With digital subscriptions, libraries do not have to consider the costs for checking in, shelving, circulating, binding, replacing stolen or damaged issues, lighting, maintenance, heating, air-conditioning and storage.
3.4 Many librarians are eager to move into an electronic world, but are unsure about how to proceed. Both their eagerness and uncertainty have valid reasons. Electronic information offers the hope of an escape from an insoluble morass of economic, space, and access problems that have accumulated over a number of years. However, the technology itself is in a state of constant flux with little probability of stability. The price for this emerging technology, with regards to both information content and infrastructure, is likely to be very high at a time when many libraries are facing their worse fiscal problems in years. Maintenance is another thorny issue. If ignored, a host of related problems, including access, migration and selection, will threaten the usefulness and even long-term viability of digital publications. In short, the problem of maintenance is bigger in libraries with digital materials. This must be considered to be both a technical and institutional issue concerning collection development, which after all is the process of making certain that a library meets the information needs of its users in a timely and economic manner. To do that, librarians must have extensive knowledge of the collection's contents, technical and legal problems as well as the need of the users. They must have a plan and a policy for ensuring continuity and consistency in the collecting program.

4. Conclusion: The Future Prospects Of A Digital World

4.1 The electronic age is upon us. However, we still live in an era of great uncertainty. As this new paradigm evolves, it is important that we step back and consider how libraries and electronic publishers need to adapt. Publishers are busy making new products while libraries watch with some puzzlement as competing products fill the market. The emergence of digitized full-text databases for subscription, either solely or as part of a package, has provided the opportunity for libraries to offer more resources than ever before. Persons (1998: 59) has rightly commented that consortia agreements and bundled full-text titles have created a situation whereby it is now possible to subscribe to a larger number of sources at significantly lower prices than in the past. However, libraries now face an increasingly challenging environment: Escalating costs and decreasing funds. It is difficult to have the best of both worlds – the advent of electronic information producing opportunities that never existed before, and the electronic storage and vast telecommunication network that has produced an environment in which rapid movement of information is possible. The challenge strikes at the very definition of what a library is. Is a library a building or a service? Is a library a collection or an access point? It appears to Goodyear and Alexander (1998: 5-6) that a library is both a building/collection and a service/access point. Publications in print and digital formats will continue to expand. Libraries will live in both worlds for many years to come!

4.2 Electronic publication is attractive if a library can find the money to pay for it. It would then be easily available to anyone anywhere through various means. Furthermore, the visibility can be enormous. Academics and librarians who hate dealing with physical collections that need re-shelving, binding and moving would accept the wisdom of an all-digital library. However, it is difficult to compare the two since each holds different values to users and librarians. Reading printed paper seems to be preferred to reading a monitor. However, electronic publications facilitate new value-added services unheard of in printed media. Adding hypertext links can enable users to gain faster and more convenient access to information. This has excited users and library staff. Thus, many
universities are beginning to develop state-of-the-art libraries focusing on access to electronic information from the desktop. The concept is a desktop integrated with campus-wide services providing better support for teaching, learning and research. User expectation of quality service depends on tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, competence, courtesy, credulity, security, access, communication and an understanding of the customers. Being able to deliver information directly to users, electronic information has expanded the role of libraries. It has also created several dichotomies for libraries: print versus electronic, ownership versus access, free versus fee, gatekeeper versus user selection. All these are both complementary and competitive. It is not a matter of either/or. It is a matter of determining the proper mix between them.

References


