

AFTERWARD: LIFE ON THE FAST TRACK

When libraries began buying e-resources, they joined publishers and information scientists on the technology train, an express that generates its own momentum. First, libraries bought current subscriptions to e-journals. Then publishers spun off the earliest years of the back file as separate purchases, and now librarians are offered full digital runs.

The STM producers, who have led the e-information revolution, soon added online reference tools, annual review type journals, and now e-monographs. Outside science, we have retrospective offerings of classic texts to look forward to through Project TORCH and potentially all pre-1923 imprints, through the still somewhat mysterious Project OCEAN at Stanford.

In primary source texts we began with the relatively modest size *English Poetry Index* and its Chadwyck-Healey brothers and sisters. Now librarians can buy 33 million pages covering all of the 18th century, with additions to come as more material is identified.

Libraries also have been willing to buy expensive products even though they are seriously flawed, since once these big historical document projects are done poorly by one vendor, they are unlikely to be redone by another.

The more libraries purchased, the more complicated it became to make sense of it all. Enter link resolvers, meta-search engines, and electronic resources management ILS modules.

What was once fairly simple is now difficult for both publishers and libraries. Anyone who works on a daily on the library functions associated with e-resources knows how labor-intensive acquisition and troubleshooting have become.

Libraries now buy content imbedded in products and services. And publishers spend a lot on these value-adding wrappers. (Testifying before the U.K. Parliamentary Commission on STM journals, the CEO of Elsevier reported the company had already invested \$360 million in its platform and expected to spend another \$180 million.) Each product has its own rules of entry, requiring libraries to focus more and more on the business of access management.

One of the most basic impacts of e-publishing has been the stimulation of the belief that libraries must transform themselves and take on new roles. For many librarians and outside commentators, the transformed library is:

- A technology and service platform, not a collection
- A possibly willing participant in the demise of print and the hybrid library
- A collaborator and a product development partner
- A change agent

Are libraries collections anymore?

Some people believe the 21st century library will no longer be “hoarder” of “containers” (that is, books), but rather an agent for retrieval and dissemination. The library will manage access and pay the bills, but make itself invisible in the process, since “...electronic information can be virtually communicated instantaneously,...its source location is irrelevant.”¹

Libraries *are* devoting more of their resources to access management. They must go through the complex process of updating their Web gateways at least every few years. They work hard to set up local e-information management systems that help users find what they are looking for. They create OPAC records for all versions with links to online full text. They install and configure link resolvers to take users to the electronic text on whatever server it resides or to automatically populate an interlibrary loan request form.

A-Z journal title lists on library Web pages are often designed to show all formats available. Libraries subscribe to services such as Serials Solutions or TDNet to track journal changes. Since the various record systems libraries maintain interact with each other in a dynamic way, however, keeping them synchronized and accurate is a never-ending process.

What happened to the hybrid library?

A few years ago library leaders talked about the challenges of maintaining the hybrid print/digital library. The balance has now shifted perceptibly to the idea that the *good* library is the electronic library. Print purchases are crowded out by digital demands and retrospective paper holdings are hidden out of sight in cold storage. Collecting just in case has become a completely retrograde concept.

If librarians can find the time, they can create a perfectly crafted use-based electronic collection. Unserved needs, however, are still hard to track and being ready for the next hot research topic or rediscovered interest is a thing of the past.

The collaborating librarian

In the early days of e-journals librarians complained to publishers about funding initial product development by being asked to pay for products before they were ready for prime time. In some cases, the connection was quite explicit, as in Elsevier's inclusion of a platform fee in its early pricing model for *ScienceDirect*.

Today libraries are still subsidizing producer costs, but in somewhat different ways. One set of expenses stretching library budgets are open access journal memberships. Libraries also may feel they must help support the good guys by continuing to purchase print copies of Project MUSE journals. Other overt forms of co-investment are arrangements like the Text Creation Partnership where libraries fund enhancements to existing commercial products.

Librarians have always been mutually supportive and strong believers in cooperation. In the digital age, they find themselves collaborating more actively not only with publishers but also with campus computing, faculty doing digital projects, and e-learning system managers.

Librarians as activists

Never before have librarians so aggressively sought to influence both their parent institutions and their suppliers. Certainly libraries were right to demand more reasonable pricing for STM serials. But the fight for radical change in the intellectual, social, and organizational structure of the scholarly information process has gone slowly.

The academy, by and large, does not feel the need to change its familiar processes and emblems of value. Publishers have invested millions in building publishing platforms and distribution systems that still work well, even if in a few cases they certainly result in outsized profit margins.

Building institutional repositories (IRs) from the ground up also is likely to cost millions. So far, at least, professors have shown little interest in depositing research articles in IRs and have paid only moderate attention (except in a few cases) to librarians' calls to boycott high-end commercial publishers.

Affording what's most important

The escalation of costs for basic electronic resources and the fact that most are sold by subscription or carry annual maintenance fees, will surely cause library budgets to be increasingly dominated by recurring expenditures. Much of what is purchased will become common to most libraries of similar size.

Less money will be available to buy more unusual items, even those items in electronic format. Although financial support to open-access journals is a vote for change and also a political statement, until OA titles are established, it also is a species of just-in-case buying that drains scarce resources.

With less grant money available for digitizing projects, funding library-as-publisher initiatives also has become more difficult. And time is money. Even collaboration may need to be rationed.

An industry insider has observed that we in the e-information world are still suffering from "content chaos"² as the result of a kind of no-publisher-left-behind syndrome. Fearing the nonnetworked would be ignored, publishers rushed out digital products, possibly even converting material that might best have been left as print only. And libraries have hastened to buy what has been offered.

More e-content is coming. And, according to the experts, in two to five years it will be linked together in every conceivable way so that researchers can move from "idea to idea," .. "in a closer approximation to how we actually think."³

Every potential link, however, generates the expectation that what can be identified can be accessed. Transformed libraries will have to focus even more intently than in the past on assuring their users have access to the highest quality and most necessary materials online (and, in some cases, even in print).

Notes

¹William A. Wulf, "Higher Education Alert: The Information Railroad Is Coming," *EDUCAUSE Review*, v. 38, no. 1 (January/February 2003).

²Mark Rowse, "Information Industry Developments," *Serials*, v.16, no. 2 (July 2003).

³Amy Brand and Kristen Fisher, "Linking Evolved: The Future of Online Research" www.researchinformation.info/rispring03linking.html and Marla Misek EContent (June 2004) "CrossRef : Citation Linking gets a Backbone," www.econtentmag.com/Articles/ArticleReader.aspx?ArticleID=6601&Query=citation%20linking.