

# Electronic Resource Assessment: Adventures in Engagement

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## Electronic Resource Assessment: Adventures in Engagement

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### Abstract:

Subscription-based electronic resources have come to represent an increasing proportion of library collections budgets. If we are going to secure the most value from such resources, ongoing assessment of them should be approached more systematically, with the full engagement of subject selectors. Recognizing this, Columbia University Libraries appointed an Electronic Resources Assessment Working Group in 2009 to include such resources within our current culture of assessment. Members of that working group, along with a supportive engineer from Library Systems, will talk about the ways in which selectors have been engaged through a three-pronged outreach effort: educational offerings in the use of electronic resource management tools; inspirational presentations from librarians who have improved collections using such tools; and the creation of an electronic resource renewal reminder system in Google Calendar. Strategically placed questions will involve the audience in the discussion: What is the current status of electronic resource assessment efforts at their libraries? What mechanisms do they currently have in place to encourage selector involvement in the process? Attendees can expect to learn of methods for engaging selectors more systematically in the process of electronic resource assessment.

Subscription-based electronic resources have come to represent an ever-increasing proportion of library collections budgets. If we are going to secure the most value from our expenditures on such resources, ongoing assessment should be approached more systematically, with the full engagement of subject selectors.

The implementation of ongoing assessment at any library will involve at least three factors: an understanding of the larger environments in the context of which assessment is taking place; a methodical approach to involving selectors more fully in assessment activities; and, finally, an evaluation of the tools that are available to support selectors in their assessment work. In evaluating available tools, a library may discover that additional tools are needed and, furthermore, that commercially available tools can be usefully supplemented by home-grown inventions. The last segment of this presentation details the construction of just such a home-grown invention at Columbia University Libraries: a system that uses data feeds from our LMS (Voyager) to create strategically situated e-resource renewal reminders in Google Calendar.<sup>1</sup>

### I. The Larger Environments

One strong indicator of the fiscal environment in which research libraries have been operating is the

table "Electronic Resources and Materials Expenditures in ARL University Libraries, 2002-2009," contained in *ARL Statistics 2008-2009*.<sup>2</sup> At all levels, Total, Average, and Median, Electronic Serials Expenditures have increased by more than 300% in this seven-year period. The Median Expenditure in 2002-2003 was \$1,649,361, whereas the median expenditure in 2008-2009 was \$5,337,237. If we turn now to Total Library Materials Expenditures, as recorded in the same table, we can see, by contrast, that the rate of increase has been much lower. That rate has been roughly 34% (from \$7,707,153 in 2002-2003 to \$10,364,778 in 2008-2009).

Clearly there are a number of variables that might be seen as cushioning the impact of this stark contrast. Increasingly, and especially in the last four to six years, libraries subscribing to electronic serials have dropped subscriptions to the corresponding print serials titles. Nevertheless, regardless of how many variables we factor in, this chart returns us to the title of this conference "Something's Gotta Give." It may be that what has to give is the common default practice of assessing an e-resource once, adding it to the collection, and then letting it sit.

In the introduction to the ARL SPEC Kit *Evaluating E-Resources*, which was published in 2010, the authors point out that we are now living in a vastly

different world than we were in 1999 when an earlier SPEC Kit, *Networked Information Resources*, had been published. Since 1999, they continue, we have gone through two economic recessions, and most libraries are no longer operating in a growth economy. They go on to suggest that libraries are, in response to the times, moving in to a newly self-aware culture of evaluation when it comes to e-resources, a culture that includes evaluating ongoing e-resources “prior to renewal.”<sup>3</sup>

The commercial publishing environment certainly plays a role in the increasingly challenging fiscal environment described above, but its dynamics cannot simply be reduced to economic factors. The 2007 Charleston Conference Proceedings included the report of a panel on the expanding academic journal literature. The report verified that the academic journal literature had indeed been expanding at a fairly consistent rate over the last fifty years. This expansion includes not only new titles but also existing journals increasing in size and/or number of issues. The majority of reasons identified for this expansion had to do with the ever expanding nature of academic discourse itself: for example, the growth of new subdisciplines and the need for scholars within those subdisciplines to find venues in which to publish.<sup>4</sup>

The commercial publishing environment presents libraries with a variety of mixed blessings. One blessing whose mixed nature has become increasingly apparent over the last ten years or so, is the bundling of online journal content into packages of various kinds—either aggregator databases that group content into a single indissoluble database or the “big deal” packages of distinct titles that are licensed in such a way that a library’s ability to cancel individual titles is heavily restricted. Both the aggregator databases and the “big deal” packages offer economies and ease of access. They also invariably involve libraries in paying for duplicate access to the same titles and/or limited ability to cancel titles that are low use and low interest.

Clearly there is no single solution that can immediately address the range of challenges indicated above. Open access models for scholarly journal publishing have shown promise; but as these evolve we are in the meanwhile faced with the immediate chal-

lenge of keeping our budgets under control from one fiscal year to the next while continuing to provide the levels of access our users have come to expect.

The third environment of which I will speak does offer some immediate hope and promise and it has coexisted with the increasingly challenging fiscal and commercial publishing environments for some time now. This would be the data environment. Within the last decade, the tools available to measure and compare the use of electronic resources have become increasingly robust, standardized, and sophisticated.

COUNTER standards, for example, were published in their first release in 2003. Their fourth release has already been posted and is currently available for public comment. COUNTER, as many of you are no doubt aware, “is an international initiative serving librarians, publishers and intermediaries by setting standards that facilitate the recording and reporting of online usage statistics in a consistent, credible and compatible way.”<sup>5</sup>

Usage statistics do not do our thinking for us, of course. Statistics that would be interpreted as low usage for a biomedical journal might correctly be interpreted as high usage for a journal of ancient numismatics. But standardized statistics, where they are available, do provide us with a significant field of consideration. Another valuable resource is Electronic Resource Management Systems (ERMS), which provide a central locus for documents and data relevant to e-resource holdings. One especially valuable feature of ERMS is the fact that they facilitate the comparison of one database or journal with another through means such as Overlap Analysis tools or consolidated COUNTER reports.

The mere fact that new tools are available, however, does not ensure that they will be utilized. University libraries have lately been faced with the need to understand these new tools and how they can be integrated into existing workflows that surround the renewal of subscription e-resources. Every organization will experience and address this challenge in its own way. At Columbia University Libraries, for example, we have more than forty subject selectors working in seven different library divisions. Assessment practices have been found to

be very uneven across disciplinary areas. In the sciences, for example, subject selectors have been very proactive in utilizing the latest data sources available as they make renewal and cancellation decisions within the limited parameters provided by “big deal” subscription packages. In some areas outside the sciences, on the other hand, many selectors are still in the process of learning more about available assessment resources.

At Columbia University Libraries, an Electronic Resources Assessment Working Group was appointed in 2009, and charged with promoting awareness and understanding of e-resource assessment tools and with facilitating their use. Our Working Group has conducted a three-pronged outreach effort to engage selectors in assessment activities: 1.) offering group and one-on-one instructional sessions in the use of e-resource management tools; 2.) arranging for inspirational case-study presentations from librarians who have used such tools to strengthen collections; and 3.) designing an e-resource renewal reminder program that feeds into our libraries’ primary scheduling system, Google Calendar.

## **II. Engaging Selectors in Assessment**

To engage selectors in these new tools, as part of the overall assessment of e-resources, has been viewed as part of a larger effort at fostering a general culture of assessment across the institution and its various functions. If we were going to perform any kind of meaningful assessment on our electronic collections, getting selectors involved in investigating the various tools and methodologies for doing so was seen as a necessary first step, and one that might lend itself to an iterative process. This process began with assigning a small group of selectors to a task force charged with investigating and making recommendations on how best to implement processes and procedures for assessing our large and growing collections of e-resources. One of the recommendations of the task force was that a permanent working group be formed and charged with a continuing investigation of tools and methods for e-resource assessment. Having selectors involved in both groups up front was seen as an essential part of fostering further selector engagement in the process.

After assignments to the permanent working group were made, the group then went on to explore workflows, projects, tools, etc. that might help us build a more systematic approach to e-resource assessment. In theory, the working group would announce new projects or workflows to selectors and then follow up in the weeks after the announcements to see who among the selectors had made meaningful progress. The group would then enlist one or two of these selectors to present at a follow-up session for all selectors, presenting their findings and/or processes in the form of examples of what others might achieve using the same tools and methods. The working group would also offer training in the use of the methods and tools. In addition, and in some cases, the group might attempt to get a rough count of who was having success and who was not so that further follow up might be tailored to specific needs. As more selectors become involved and gain experience there would be more expertise within the system and we would be on our way to a more systematic approach to e-resource assessment.

As an example of how this process worked in practice, the working group created an e-resource renewal reminder system using Google Calendar. After the system had been sufficiently tested, the group announced and demonstrated the capabilities of the calendar at a meeting of the Selectors’ Discussion Group. The working group then followed up with selectors to see who had actually made use of the calendar. Engaged selectors were then enlisted to present their finding and methodologies. The working group followed up again to see if more selectors had come on board. The working group was also able to track the level of overall engagement by looking at calendar usage. When a critical mass (approximately half of all selectors) had been reached the working group could then reach out to selectors not yet involved in order to get a better sense of what was holding them back; did they need more training, are there specific issues specific to their particular areas that make the system a less useful tool than elsewhere, are there others factors not yet considered? Going forward, this will hopefully prove to be a useful process for the group as it announces additional projects in its ongoing support of e-resource assessment.

### III. Google Calendar

Our e-resource renewal reminder program is an example of our Working Group's outreach efforts. Columbia University Libraries uses data exports from our library management system (Voyager) to create individual fund calendars in Google Calendar. Google Calendar is used as our in-house calendaring system, which allows subject selectors to "subscribe" to any relevant fund calendars and view the renewal events within their daily workplace calendar. (See Figure 1 on next page.) The renewals are designed to help selectors better synchronize their assessment efforts with the workflows and deadlines of the Acquisitions Department.

Each fund calendar is populated by a payment event when an electronic resource continuing payment is made in Voyager Acquisitions. Each transaction event contains the name of e-resource, fund

code, Voyager purchase order number, amount paid, vendor name, and any purchase order notes. Based on the premise that the next renewal will occur twelve months from the initial transaction event, each transaction event generates two reminder events at predetermined intervals prior to the next anticipated renewal. The first reminder is dated five months prior; and the second is dated three months prior. These reminders are clearly labeled as five-month and three-month renewal reminders for the e-resource in question, and they list the anticipated date of the next renewal.

The Python code that was used to implement this feed of data from our voyager LMS to Google Calendar can be accessed through: [https://github.com/nadaoneal/gapps\\_python\\_what\\_ever](https://github.com/nadaoneal/gapps_python_what_ever).

## Staff work view

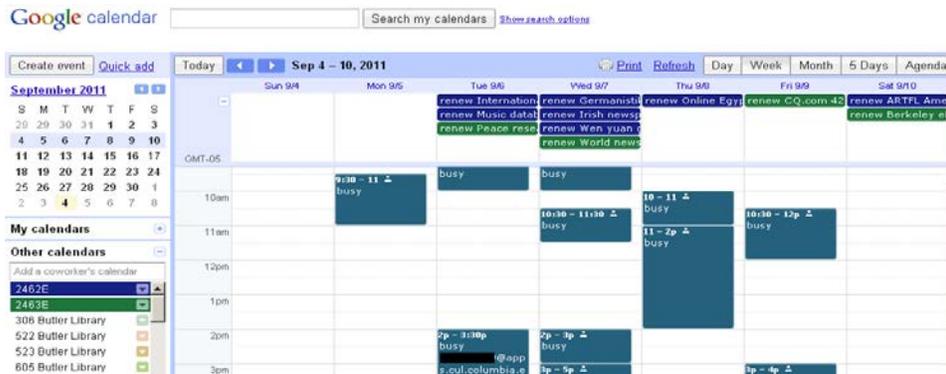


Figure 1: One week calendar with fund calendar events and reminders at top

**renew Sage Premier Package [REDACTED] by 04/01/2011**  
 Fri, December 31, 2010, 12am – 12am

**Calendar** 2465E

**Created by** \_backup@apps.cul.columbia.edu

**Description** (three months reminder) 2465E SAS173395 20100401 Sage Premier Package  
 PAYMENT RECORD 1 ilu expenditure [REDACTED] NDI3223 ags1  
 NERL USD [REDACTED] CUL 10

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**Reminders** No reminders set  
[Add a reminder](#)

**Figure 2: Reminder anticipating the next renewal by three months**

<sup>1</sup> This presentation covers some of the same territory that is covered at greater length in Jeffrey D. Carroll, Colleen Major, Nada O’Neal, and John Tofanelli. *Assessing Ongoing Electronic Resource Purchases: Linking Tools to Synchronize Staff Workflows*. Forthcoming in: *Journal of Electronic Resource Librarianship*. Projected publication date: June 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Martha Kyrillidou and Shaneka Morris, eds. *ARL Statistics 2008-2009*. (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2011), 21. Accessed December 12, 2011. <http://www.arl.org/bm~doc/arlstat09.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Richard Bleiler and Jill Livingston. *Evaluating E-Resources*. SPEC Kit 316. (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2010), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Summerfield, “Report on the Panel: The Expanding Journal Literature,” in *Charleston Conference Proceedings 2007*, ed. Beth R Bernhardt, Tim Daniels, and Kim Steinle ( Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2008), 103-106.

<sup>5</sup> See: COUNTER: Counting Online Usage of Networked Electronic Resources / About COUNTER, Accessed December 12, 2011. <http://www.projectcounter.org/about.html>