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e-Journals, Embargoes and Other Matters: Are the Publishers Villains or not?

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In her Op Ed, *Random Rantings and Ravings: My Thoughts on E-journals, Embargoes, Etc.* (*ATG* v.14#3, June 2002, p.36), **Allison Mays** expresses some frustrations about embargoes imposed by publishers in aggregators' databases. We've since been conducting a friendly email correspondence with **Allison** which has prompted us to write this piece in the hope we can clarify some issues. I should point out from the start that **Palgrave Macmillan** has an agreement with one of the major aggregators, so we think that they provide a valuable service and are a good thing. However, we do not believe that they are intended as a substitute for subscriptions to journals, and in practice they can never serve that purpose as we hope to show in this article.

It is perfectly true that, in the process of migrating from the old print-only world to the current mixed environment of print and online and maybe at some future stage to online only, we publishers have at times reacted defensively and not always with great vision. However, we really do think that the times when journal publishers were myopically defending only old-fashioned print subscriptions are past. All the major journal publishers, and many of the minor ones, now have robust online services of increasing technological sophistication — working for both those who produce the content and for our subscribers. At **Palgrave Macmillan**, our customers can subscribe to print only, online only, print and online, and we also offer site licences — we really don't mind, as long as we are providing what the customer wants. There are no embargoes in our online journals — indeed we offer **Ahead of Print (AOP)** publication, the very opposite of an embargo. There are still some little local difficulties in providing online-only journals. For example, in the United Kingdom an online only subscription is subject to a 17.5% sales tax (VAT) whereas a combined print and online subscription is not. Whoever heard of a logical tax man?

However, **Allison's** unhappiness related not to our own online journals but to the aggregated databases offered by **EBSCO, ProQuest, Gale** and others. Here, it is true that a number of publishers (including **Palgrave Macmillan**) insist on embargoes — but there are good reasons for this and those reasons relate to the maintenance of subscriptions, but most definitely not to the defence of print. It might help to clarify here some of the economics of publishers' own online journals and of publishers' participation in aggregated databases.

First, let's address our own journals. Some of our journals are owned by, and effectively created by, scholarly organisations. The journal is their vehicle for promoting scholarly communication and often provides a useful (in the case of major journals very substantial) income for them. We at **Palgrave Macmillan** have a contractual obligation to our journal owners to provide a good service, and maintaining/maximising revenue is a key part of this. If we fail to meet expectations and targets we can lose the future contract to publish the journal. We are, of course, making a profit from the service we provide, but in the current very competitive environment a significant proportion of the income from a journal goes to the scholarly organisations, and helps to fund future scholarship for the benefit of us all. So, we have an obligation to safeguard the interests of our jour-

nal owners and to maximise revenue for them (and for our proprietors in the case of the journals we own). In general online journals are an excellent thing, but the simple fact is that it costs more to provide journals in two formats and as long as our customers demand both we must supply both and bear the costs.

In considering the relationship between publishers' own online journals and aggregated databases, it is worth stressing that we publish journals for scholars and researchers. This is our target market and, as we understand it, libraries subscribe to our journals to serve researchers by delivering the latest scholarship to them as soon as possible. This is, after all, the key function of a journal and that's what libraries are paying for.

Now, the economics of aggregated databases are different and also, as we understand it, so is their purpose and market. When a library subscribes to one of the aggregated databases probably a third or perhaps slightly more of the money goes to the publishers and to the journal owners. The rest funds the operating costs and profits of the aggregator. If aggregated databases were to become libraries' preferred method of subscribing to journal content, the impact on journal publishers, and the scholarly organisations with whom we work, would be disastrous — we would lose one third of our revenues. It might be argued that if aggregators expanded the market for journal content then publishers would ultimately earn more, but we all know that library budgets are all too finite. It therefore makes sense for journal owners to take steps to prevent revenues migrating from subscriptions (whether they are print or online is not material). The embargoes that so frustrate **Allison** are one of these measures.

As we see it, it's not only the economics of aggregated databases that are different. Fundamentally, they cater to a different need and different users. Aggregated databases are just that: a mass of searchable content in which users can search for information on a wide range of topics. They are designed for use by students needing reliable information on a particular topic from a wide array of sources. They are not vehicles for scholarly communication of the latest scholarship targeted at researchers.

Excellent as these databases are they are no substitute for journal subscriptions. First of all, they cannot be a reliable source of any particular journal because the aggregators licence content from publishers for a limited period (typically three to five years). In addition, not all the content published in the journal will necessarily appear in the aggregated database and it may be subject to an embargo.

We hope that this article has clarified some issues for our library colleagues. Put simply from our perspective, librarians need to choose between two different ways of spending their serials budget: on core research journals required by their researchers or on large databases of quasi-encyclopedic content for students. Meanwhile, we will continue to work to enhance the online delivery of our journals to serve the future needs of the scholarly community. 🐷

