Biz of Acq-Selecting and Processing Electronic Resources: How to Plug Libraries into the Workflow

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Biz of Acq — Selecting and Processing Electronic Resources: How to Plug Librarians into the Workflow

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Columns Editor's Note: Electronic resources take up more and more of our time and attention as acquisitions librarians. Because of their particular nature as digital entities, and because of the complex acquisitions arrangements they often require, electronic products are forcing librarians to rethink and reform procedures for selection and integration of materials into the collection. In this month’s column, Rob Withers, Electronic Information Services Librarian at Miami University, draws on a new survey of librarians, as well as recent library science literature, to describe how libraries are adapting acquisitions and collection development processes to the digital age. — RR

Libraries have been adding a growing number of electronic resources to their collections, and the availability of resources over the Internet has fueled this proliferation. In his 1996 article, Gene Allen notes that librarians he surveyed predicted that 10 years from the date of his survey, expenditures for electronic resources would be anywhere from 5% to 25% of their budget.1 Online products do not “play by the rules” set for selecting, ordering, and processing library materials because: Technical prowess may be needed to assess the feasibility of a product in a particular environment; The library does not receive physical copies to inspect and process; Electronic resources may be bundled together with dozens or even hundreds of products; Online products may be purchased by a consortium, rather than by a single institution.

Adding electronic resources to the collection therefore poses a number of questions to those involved with acquisitions: Who should be involved in evaluating resources prior to order placement? How are electronic resources paid for? How are they inspected and checked in when they become available? Who is notified after they have been received? What changes in job descriptions are needed to ensure the ability to select, order, and process these materials?

To answer these questions, this column will rely on a survey of existing literature concerned with processing electronic resources. In addition, responses to a questionnaire posted to AcqNet-L and CollDev-L will help to explore the ways that libraries are coping with the challenges posed by the addition of electronic resources, particularly Internet resources, to their collections.

Selecting and Ordering

In an article on electronic resources, one librarian stated: “Selections: they’re not just for collection development librarians any more.” Responses to a survey posted to CollDev-L and AcqNet-L support her statement. A majority of respondents (89%) indicated that collection development librarians selected electronic resources. However, 84% of respondents indicated that other types of librarians also select, 72% reported that reference librarians could select, 44% reported that electronic resources librarians could select, 16% reported that systems librarians could make decisions, and 50% of institutions reported that selection decisions could be made by other positions. Smaller libraries at which no position dedicated exclusively to collection development

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through technology, and there has been a concern that rights-holders may use some form of anti-copying technology to prevent even legally-permitted copying.

An important change is the provision for compensation to rights-holders when a copy is made for the purposes of private copying, and illustration for teaching and scientific research. Libraries are now also able to make copies of items for the purposes of archiving and conservation purposes. In the initial proposal, libraries would be in breach of copyright for these activities.

There are quite a number of detailed changes in other articles, but in the main these do not have a substantive impact on libraries and information services. One final addition to the Amended Proposal is the establishment of a Contact Committee, set up with representatives of the competent authorities of the Member States, to monitor progress with the implementation of the Directive, provide a forum for the exchange of information, and to examine development in the sector. This approach is similar to the mechanism set up under the Data Protection Directive and is very much to be welcomed.

Timetable for implementation

Every six months a Member State in rotation takes the responsibility of acting as the President of the European Commission, and currently it is Finland, which was keen to have pushed through the directive as part of its commitment to information society developments. Approval of the Directive will have to be made by the Council of Ministers of each Member State responsible for what is called the Internal Market. A Council Working Party was set up earlier in the year to work through amendments suggested by the Parliament and other groups.

At a meeting in September, discussion was mainly focused on Article 6 and it seems that libraries and other user groups’ concerns were taken on board by almost all national experts, so that a favourable wording of Article 6 is likely to be proposed. The next meeting of the working party on the Directive was held on 28-29 October in Helsinki, and under discussion were the evolution of conditions of contracts and licenses concerning digital use, technological protection systems and rights management information, liability and the institution of blocking illegal distribution of protected works, and the question of applicable law in the digital environment.

A status report will be presented at the Internal Market Council on 7 December. It seems now that the Finnish presidency will not be able to reach a political agreement or common position in this year and that the dossier will move on to the Portuguese presidency, though little change in direction or commitment is likely. The Portuguese presidency plans to reach a political agreement/common position in March 2000. This means that it is likely that the Directive will have to be implemented by Member States in 2003.
ment existed were most likely to report selections made by someone other than a collection development librarian. Some larger university and public libraries mentioned that associate directors participated in selection decisions, as well.

Selection decisions undergo at least some review at all responding libraries: 30% reported that selection decisions were “sometimes” reviewed and 61% that they were “always” reviewed. The person or persons responsible for reviewing decisions vary enormously. As one person noted, the need to “worry about implementation, access, copyright, and quality control” often means that different individuals with different perspectives must assess each electronic product. Of those libraries responding to the survey, 45% indicated that decisions are reviewed by a committee. At smaller libraries serving colleges and community colleges, this percentage was lower—17% and 33%, respectively, whereas 72% of larger university libraries used a committee to evaluate decisions. Of those institutions not relying on a committee, 14 required approval from a department head or director, one required approval from a system librarian, and one required approval from an electronic resources librarian. Make-up of the committees that approve orders varies, but may include systems librarians (17%); electronic resources librarians (10%), or acquisitions librarians (2%). Of those libraries that only sometimes evaluated decisions, the primary criteria used to determine which decisions are reviewed are cost (75%), compatibility with library hardware/software (62%), cross-disciplinary coverage (55%), and consortial purchases (58%).

Evaluating electronic products is difficult without using the product. As one librarian observed, assessing electronic products can require gauging layout, graphics, audio/video components, ease of use, and response time. She suggests that many librarians rely on thirty-day trials, and results of our survey indicated that 96% of users sometimes take advantage of trial offers. Only slightly less popular are demonstrations, which 86% of libraries used. Approximately a third of responding institutions, particularly those with less extensive collections, sometimes visit other libraries that have the product. One institution occasionally uses interlibrary loan to obtain multimedia products.

A variety of pricing structures exists for electronic resources: libraries may pay for a single item, a package of items, or a combination of print/electronic subscriptions; they may purchase individually or as members of a consortium; and they may pay for a site license, or for a product limited to a certain number of simultaneous users. The types of funds used to pay for electronic products are varied as the purchasing options. Libraries rely on a mix of funds to pay for electronic products. Of those libraries responding to the survey, 70% had a fund or funds devoted to electronic resources. In several instances, these funds were used for all electronic products, but most libraries utilize these funds for resources which cross disciplinary boundaries or are general reference resources. Also used are serials funds for a particular discipline (37%), monographic funds for a particular discipline (33%), general serials funds (34%), and general monographic funds (23%). As one author speculated in her 1998 article, most libraries rely on electronic funds for package deals including items relevant to many fields, but ordinarily use discipline-specific funds for other resources. Two-thirds of libraries surveyed used a combination of these types of funds; 29% used a separate electronic resources fund for all purchases, and 5% relied on serials funds. Institutions relying solely on one fund tended to be smaller, but did include eight university libraries. Surprisingly, although electronic purchases are essentially serial in nature—in that they require a continuing commitment of funds—nonetheless monographic funds are widely used for such purchases.

Most libraries cannot use funds from the materials budget for software/hardware. In his study of 15 Midwestern university libraries, Norman found that only 22% of libraries could purchase hard-

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ware/software from their materials budget. Likewise, the survey used by this article found that 21% of responding libraries could regularly do so, although several other respondents commented that they could occasionally or infrequently use the materials budget for automated equipment, and one indicated it could purchase software only, but not hardware. University libraries were less likely to be able to tap into the materials budget—only 8% could do so—while up to 50% of other libraries could.

Gene Norman's 1996 study of Midwestern universities also found that the collection development librarian, acquisitions librarian, and director or dean most frequently negotiated contracts. The survey used in this article found a greater variety: at 36% of institutions, negotiations are handled by an acquisitions librarian, 29% rely on the director, 21% relied on a collection development librarian (usually the head of collection development), 17% relied on an assistant/associate director, and 15% relied on systems librarians. Other answers included electronic resources coordinators (9%), university purchasing or administration (7%), and a variety of other positions (12%), including serials librarians, designated reference librarians, a cataloging/electronic resources librarian and an electronic resources/copyright librarian. Smaller institutions relied more heavily on acquisitions librarians and directors to negotiate, with such positions negotiating contracts at two-thirds of colleges and community colleges and all responding special libraries.

The decision to discard hard copies of material purchased in electronic format can be a difficult one. Some users may be unwilling to adapt to a new format. More problematic is that electronic formats may not duplicate exactly the contents of their print counterparts. They may leave out certain types of materials (letters to the editor, book reviews, etc.), excerpt only selected articles, or exclude pictures or charts. The overwhelming majority (68%) of libraries responding indicated that decisions on canceling or withdrawing print equivalents was left up to the selector. Another 18%, perhaps wary of losing access to electronic products in the event that the subscription was discontinued, kept both the print and electronic items, while 6% of responding libraries waited for a period of time to evaluate the online products before canceling print counterparts. Several respondents noted that the decision to retain the print copy was sometimes dictated by price breaks offered by vendors or by consortial deals, rather than library policies or librarians' wishes.

**Receiving & Processing**

The challenges that electronic materials pose to traditional workflows based on print resources continue after materials become available to the library that ordered them. At one time, the University of Minnesota did not use the integrated system to track expenditures of electronic items. Most libraries have now joined Minnesota in including electronic resources in their integrated system and in their technical services workflow. However, integrating electronic resources with print resources raises new questions: How and by whom are they checked in? How is an electronic item inspected for defects? And who is notified of its arrival and expected to process it?

Some libraries opt not to "inspect" electronic resources at all: 16% indicated that they did not inspect such resources, while another 36% indicated that they only spot-checked resources. Such libraries often indicated that they expected selectors to have inspected items for defects prior to placing an order, or that they were informed of problems by feedback from public services staff or users. However, many other libraries do systematically inspect their receipts, and several libraries noted that they had a schedule for checking links on materials. Libraries that do systematically inspect electronic receipts rely most often on selectors (55%), systems personnel (43%), reference librarians (37%), heads of collection development (35%), and electronic resources librarians (10%). Used by less than 10% of responding libraries were administrators, media librarians, and catalogers. Some libraries responding to the survey have firm guidelines for the inspection of materials. One library noted that a trial of the product was required before it could be ordered. Another library requires one selector to be designated as a "point person" who evaluates the product, creates information manuals for the product, provides training for other librarians, and remains the in-house expert on that product once it is available at the library.

Cataloging issues relating to electronic resources affect acquisitions because "there is no longer an assumed path to cataloging after acquisition of a remotely accessed title, as there has been for all but a subset of print materials. There is not piece received to trigger cataloging, and not all remote resources are cataloged." Following check-in, libraries can and do exercise a number of options for making electronic resources available, and consequently, for routing materials out of the acquisitions and/or serials department. Close to two-thirds of responding libraries (62%) said that they cataloged electronic resources in their OPACs, but an even greater majority (93%) made their electronic resources available via library Web pages. University libraries (90%) were most likely to rely on Web pages, while only 50% of colleges and 66% of community colleges did so. Subject pages developed by users are also frequently used by 45% of all respondents; again, university libraries were more likely to use them (49%) than community colleges (33%) and colleges (20%), or other institutions. This overlap is not surprising. The University of Minnesota relies on Web pages and catalogs to provide access to electronic titles. Some librarians at that institution want to continue adding links to the Web page because users find it convenient; in addition, despite attempts to review holdings, each review still identifies items that have not been cataloged. Other libraries cataloged the records into their OPACs and provided links to the records via the OPAC. The University of Minnesota also provides links in their OPAC to the library's electronic resource management system, allowing users to search for electronic resources and request them. However, some libraries do not provide links to electronic resources in their OPACs, citing limitations in their systems or other reasons. Some libraries also provide links to electronic resources on their library Web pages, allowing users to access the resources directly. The University of Minnesota provides links to electronic resources on their library Web pages, allowing users to access the resources directly.
An instance of such a change is the recently created Acquisitions Coordinator at the University of Wisconsin. This trend is ongoing: several respondents noted examples of new or re-written positions for which they were planning or seeking approval.

**Conclusion**

Electronic products do not fall neatly into traditional definitions of information products; digital resources, therefore, compel libraries to change practices and staffing in order to accommodate these new resources. For example, electronic products blur the lines between monograph and serial, and addressing the issues of copyright, access, and quality control raised by electronic resources does not fall exclusively into any one traditional library unit. Dealing with electronic resources is a trial and error process; a variety of approaches are currently evolving. One observer notes that the challenges presented by adjusting workflows to integrate electronic resources provide the potential for confusion, ambiguity, and trial and error.