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When Can Subscriptions Become Electronic-Only? Developing Guidelines for Decision Making

by Kristen DeVoe (Pittsburgh, PA) <devoek@verizon.net>

Introduction

Print journals have traditionally been the predominant version available in academic libraries. The reliability and durability of printed journals has, in the past, justified the large investments that academic libraries have made in acquiring and preserving print journal titles. However, in recent years journals have become increasingly available in electronic versions, offering increased, and sometimes enhanced, access to journal content. In the earlier years of electronic journal publishing, libraries licensed access to electronic journals as a way to supplement print collections, to provide wider access to scholarly literature, and to experiment with a new and developing technology. Until very recently, electronic versions of journals were seldom regarded as an appropriate substitute for printed versions. More and more, the availability of journals in electronic format, combined with decreasing materials budgets and an increasing pressure from users for constant and remote access, is leading libraries to re-evaluate their print and electronic journal subscriptions. The purpose of this re-evaluation in many libraries is to determine if the print version of a journal may be cancelled when the journal is licensed or subscribed to both print and electronic format.

Are libraries actually acting on their serials holdings evaluations and canceling print in the face of budget and space constraints and user demand, among other reasons? It appears that they are. In 2002, an informal assessment of online discussions indicated that some libraries were canceling print subscriptions to some journals when the journal also was subscribed to in electronic format. Similarly, a survey of academic libraries in 2003 revealed that 65% of the libraries surveyed had cancelled some print subscriptions when the electronic version of the journal was available. Finally, an informal online survey conducted by the author in October 2005 offers data to support this, revealing that of 167 respondents, 142 (85%) have cancelled print journals subscriptions when the library also has access to an electronic version.

This data suggests that libraries are in fact canceling some print subscriptions when the electronic version is also available. This is understandable as electronic journals have certain advantages, such as allowing libraries to serve remote users, to serve several users at a time, and to use saved money for other materials.

Cancellation of print titles that are also received electronically is an activity that should be undertaken with the utmost consideration and care.

Electronic journals, although improving, are not always the same as print titles in terms of reliability, content, authority, and sustainability. If libraries are not actively choosing to cancel print journals for electronic versions, many are often forced to cancel some print titles that are also received electronically because they cannot financially and architecturally support access to journals in multiple formats. Explicitly delineating, in a policy or set of guidelines, the criteria that electronic journals must meet before their print counterparts can be cancelled may help streamline the print cancellation process, allow libraries to make informed cancellation decisions, explain cancellation decisions to users, and make cancellation decisions more consistent across all subject areas.

Much has already been written on the advantages and disadvantages of electronic journals in academic libraries, and on canceling print subscriptions when electronic versions are also received. Regardless of whether canceling print for electronic versions is a wise decision or not, data suggests that it does occur in academic libraries. Rather than providing an extended discussion on whether or not canceling print subscriptions that are also received electronically is a wise or rash decision for academic libraries at this point in time, this article examines the decision making processes that academic libraries and staff go through when determining whether or not to cancel print journals. Emphasis is placed on the development and implementation of guidelines to advise this decision making process, and an examination of criteria that can be included in such policies or guidelines.

Developing Guidelines

When deciding to cancel print journal subscriptions because they are also received electronically, it is extremely important to clarify the circumstances under which this can occur. Libraries can do this by having well-developed criteria for faculty and staff to consider when reviewing a print journal for cancellation and comparing the electronic version to the print. Many libraries have collection development policies that have not yet been updated to provide guidelines with the necessary criteria to clarify these circumstances. To address the absence of such documents, academic libraries draft separate guidelines, rewrite the collection development policy, or integrate policies into the existing collection development policy.

Often these policies are available online so that students and faculty can refer to them when they have questions about the cancellation of print journals.

Guidelines written to help library faculty and staff determine whether or not a print subscription may be cancelled when it is also received electronically are often flexible in their design. Using the guidelines, the selector should be able to easily compare the electronic version of a journal to the print version by analyzing certain criteria outlined in the document. It is important to note that written criteria in the form of a policy present guidance but cannot provide a specific directive for any decision. Instead, these guidelines or policies provide faculty and staff with criteria to strongly consider but cannot dictate what to do in each instance.

Who is Writing Guidelines and Policies?

The author's survey conducted in October 2005 reveals that despite the high number of libraries that have cancelled print journals, a much lower number of respondents (39 or 23.4%) have documented guidelines to advise library faculty and staff on the decision of whether or not to cancel print titles that they also receive electronically. Three respondents (1.8%) are developing guidelines or policies to advise faculty and staff on this issue. Of the remaining respondents that do not have guidelines or policies currently in place, 66 have plans to develop and implement guidelines, 18 have no plans to develop guidelines, and the majority, 61 respondents, are not sure at this point in time.

In the same survey, respondents indicated that a committee consisting of library and departmental faculty often drafts the policies. Other frequent responses indicated that a task force of collection development faculty or staff, a collection management librarian, serials and electronic resources librarians, or the library director drafted the guidelines. Most responses to the question on who was responsible for drafting the guidelines indicated that a group or committee rather than a single person wrote them.

Can Guidelines and Policies Help?

Guidelines for library decision-making have the potential to be extremely beneficial for library faculty and staff responsible for making decisions on canceling print journal subscriptions as well as for users. As one respondent to the author's October 2005 survey said, "It is always nice to have a set of guidelines in place for any type of library process or procedure. The document is always there for reference and can be updated/revised any time to fit the needs of that particular library environment." As that respondent noted, guidelines can serve as a flexible reference tool intended to help with decision-making processes. Well-developed, written policies, clarifying the circumstances under which print journals can be cancelled when the
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library also receives the electronic version, have the potential to change a library’s decision-making process on this issue. Using guidelines can help library staff and faculty make well informed and carefully thought through decisions. Without some policies clearly iterating the criteria that electronic journals must meet before the print can be cancelled, libraries risk making reactionary decisions in the face of budget constraints, space constraints, and increasing user demand for electronic access. Guidelines on this issue are not only helping libraries make print cancellation decisions, they also help libraries make print retention decisions. When the electronic version meets the requirements outlined in the policy, libraries know they can cancel the print subscription, and for those titles that do not meet the requirements, the library knows to retain the print subscriptions.

Consistency

Respondents to the author’s October 2005 survey reported that consistency was a key benefit to having a written policy for decision making on the issue of canceling print subscriptions when the electronic version is also received. Guidelines can ensure that library faculty and staff apply the same criteria to each journal title under consideration. For libraries that have subject liaisons responsible for some collection development decisions, a set of guidelines will provide each liaison with the same basic set of criteria to consider when making print subscription cancellations suggestions or decisions.

Time Saving

Academic libraries spend a considerable amount of time discussing and evaluating print journal titles for potential cancellation. Without a document to outline the criteria that library faculty and staff should consider when making cancellation decisions, discussions are whether or not to cancel the print version of a journal can become circular and frustrating for those involved. Guidelines force all involved parties to start from the same page when considering a print version of a title for cancellation. Referring to the same criteria when making a decision can save time for everyone involved in the decision making process rather than consuming the number of people required to be involved, or by reducing the amount of time spent by decision-makers on each issue related to print subscription cancellation.

Enhanced Communication

When print journal subscriptions are being considered for cancellation because the electronic version is also received, faculty and students are not always aware of the decision making process. A major benefit of having a written policy on this issue is that they can help explain cancellation or primary-format changes for individual titles. Guidelines explain why decisions are made and provide validation for those decisions. It is helpful to include faculty and students in the decision-making process so that they are aware of the criteria that are considered and how decisions are made. When faculty or students question why a title has been cancelled in print, they can refer to the guidelines to understand how and why decisions are made. Many institutions make their policy available online so that students and faculty can easily access them when they have questions.

Criteria to Consider

The decision to cancel a print journal subscription when the electronic version is also received is one that must be made thoughtfully. There is no “one size fits all” list of criteria that can be included in a set of guidelines to advise decision making on this issue. It is important to take local institutional and user considerations into account, to evaluate subscriptions on a title-by-title basis, and to continuously ask for faculty input during the evaluation and comparison of the two formats. As mentioned earlier, flexibility is also important when writing a policy intended to advise selectors on this issue. There may be factors not originally considered when writing the guidelines that come up when print journal subscriptions are actually under consideration for cancellation. It is important that policies are not so restrictive that consideration cannot be given to any unanticipated issues. Guidelines should also be flexible enough to change with the industry so that they do not become outdated and useless in a short period of time.

When creating a policy to advise decision making, libraries may want to develop a philosophical statement on the issue of canceling print subscriptions when the electronic version is also received: this could include a statement of the economic challenges faced by the library due to maintaining dual format subscriptions; it could also include a statement of general preference for the electronic format over the print format if this is applicable; a preliminary statement can also include information on what the library plans to do with the print copies it already has, where a user can go to discuss a particular title with a library faculty or staff member, and statements on why the library feels it is appropriate (if it does) to move some subscriptions to electronic only access.

What can be included in a set of guidelines if every title is unique and should be considered individually? What follows is a list of criteria, by no means exhaustive, that academic libraries may consider for inclusion in their policies and guidelines. These criteria were developed based on a review of the online guidelines (continued on page 40)

Kristen DeVoe

Born & Lived: Born in Cincinnati, Ohio but moved shortly after to Louisiana. I have lived in New Orleans, LA; Johnson City, TN; Charleston, SC and now I am in Pittsburgh, PA.

Family: Father, Michael DeVoe, and mother, Rebecca DeVoe live in Jonesborough, TN; brother, Stephen DeVoe, is an engineering student at Louisiana State University. Fiancé, also Stephen, is a PhD student in Theatre at the University of Pittsburgh.

Education: B.A. in History with a minor in Asian Studies from the College of Charleston, M.LIS from the University of South Carolina.

First Job: First job ever was at a pizza place in Johnson City, TN. First job in a library was in Charleston, SC at the College of Charleston in the Collection Development department.

Professional Career and Activities: Since I moved to Pittsburgh a couple of months ago I’ve been working part-time ‘or Tutor.com’s Librarians by Request. I have recently become involved with writing a new (for me) column in Against the Grain called “Innovations Affecting Us” and another survey column in The Charleston Report. I belong to several library organizations/associations such as ALA, NASIG, and PaLA and I try to attend conferences when I can.

In my spare time I like to: Knit, read, exercise, bake, and search for new music to listen to. I also find myself spending quite a bit of time wondering how I am going to make it through my first Pittsburgh winter!

Favorite Books: Anything by Carson McCullers, Aparat by Clive Barker, and many many more!

Most Meaningful Career Achievement: Right now I feel that my most meaningful career achievement is writing for publication.

How/Where do I see the industry in five years: Transition from print to electronic resources will continue with serials. I think that many libraries will reach a point where they cannot financially maintain multiple formats and since many users are asking for electronic versions, print cancellations will increase. I also think that format standards will begin to emerge for electronic books.

people profile

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of several academic libraries, the responses of participants in the October 2005 survey on policies and guidelines for canceling print subscriptions when the electronic version is also received, and a review of the literature on this topic. The criteria listed are generic and are only intended to serve as a basis for academic libraries developing their own guidelines on this issue.

**Content**

- Is the electronic journal missing any content that is available in the printed version such as letters to the editor, regular columns, supplements, and feature articles? If so, what, exactly, is missing?
- Is the quality of the color images (if any) in the electronic journal the same as in the printed journal?
- Does the electronic journal offer any enhanced features, such as media files, which the printed version does not have?
- Consider the currency of the content. Is there an embargo on content? Electronic journal content should be made available no later than publication of the print version.

**Access**

- Is the electronic version of the journal only available through an aggregator? If so, does the library consider aggregator access to be an adequate substitute for the print copy or publisher-provided electronic version? Aggregators often provide access to journal titles from a number of different publishers, making it difficult to ensure the stability of the title list. As one respondent to the 2005 survey said, "Aggregation was NOT considered an alternative to print subscriptions already held in-house. We firmly believe that duplication in aggregators is a luxury and not a base for subscriptions."
- Does the electronic journal offer campus-wide IP access to all authorized users?
- Can off-campus users access the journal?

**Licensing Concerns**

- Does the license allow for the cancellation of print? Some licenses have restrictions, such as maintaining a print subscription in order to receive electronic access.
- Is the subscription currently through a consortial agreement? If so this can make the cancellation process extremely difficult as changes must be discussed with consortial partners.
- Does the license allow for fair use and scholarly sharing?
- Does the license allow for electronic journal access within the library to members of the public?
- Does the license include any restrictions on interlibrary loan and electronic reserves? If so, what are they?
- Does the license include any restrictions on the downloading, printing, or viewing of articles? If so, what are they?
- If your institution has multiple sites, is access provided for all campuses or is it limited to only one?

**Stability**

- Does the publisher provide a reliable and stable online interface for accessing the electronic journal?
- How frequently are technical problems encountered with the Website or server?
- Does each journal have a unique, durable URL providing access to the publication?
- How quick is provider response for technical assistance?
- Are users notified of anticipated server maintenance and downtime?

**Cost**

- How much money would the library save (if any) by canceling the print subscription? Consider that computer printing costs may increase if more journals are electronic only.
- How can any saved monies be used to expand the library's collection or for other purposes?

**Archival Concerns**

- Consider the longevity of the subscription and the importance of long-term access for each title. Does the provider make provisions for archival access if a title is cancelled? Many respondents to the October 2005 survey indicated that archival access was of great importance and, if no provisions are made, they do not cancel the print title.
- What kind of archival access does the publisher provide? Does the license have a perpetual access clause? If not, can one be negotiated?
- Some publishers offer a rolling wall of access, thus providing only access to the most recent years. If this is the case, does the publisher plan to make backfiles available for purchase? What is the cost?
- Are there other options for ensuring archival access, such as keeping the print issues for those years that are not available electronically?

**User Input and Use**

- Consider the importance of electronic journal usage statistics to your institution. Does the publisher provide electronic journal usage statistics to evaluate electronic journal use? How are these statistics delivered? Are the statistics COUNTER compliant?
- Do you have usage statistics that indicate a preferred format for a particular title?
- Consider user format preference. Be aware that user preference may differ across subject areas and that electronic journals may be preferred by one group of users but not by another depending on the subject.
- Consult the faculty when considering print subscriptions for cancellation because the electronic version is available.
- Does the user community consider the print version of a title to be the authoritative version? Consider the importance of authority for each subject.

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**Some Additional Reading**


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<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
Electronic Journal Subscriptions: The Agent's Perspective

by Tina Feick (Vice President, Customer Relations, Swets Information Services, 160 Ninth Avenue, Rummende, New Jersey 08078; Phone: 1-800-645-6595, ext. 2238; Fax: 1-856-632-7238) <feick@us.swets.com>

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Libraries in the E-world:
New Service Needs

To understand the subscription agent’s new role and the value an agent provides in the electronic environment, it helps to first take a brief look at the impact that electronic migration and market forces have had on libraries. Acquiring, accessing and managing information is increasingly complex due to differing publisher pricing models and packages, licensing and rights management, and a lack of overall standards and consistency. In addition, libraries face new challenges to provide comprehensive electronic access, yet lack the time and resources to keep pace with these changes due to intense budget pressures. As a result, many libraries find they need a reliable partner to manage the operational complexity, adapt to electronic needs, and minimize costs — this is where the agent comes in.

How agents have responded: Evolving Services and New Technology

E-world Perspective for the Traditional Agent Services

Though different from print, the model for e-access to journals still falls primarily in the subscription model, with some deviation for back-file and single article purchases. The majority of e-journals have a once a year fee charged on a subscription basis. There may also be a separate cost for e-access, but all of the fees will still be billed annually. Consequently, the library’s, publisher’s, and agent’s systems can accommodate ordering, payment, and invoicing electronic resources, just as they do for the print world. Where agents have had to adjust their subscription systems falls into several categories: customer profiles, catalog title listings, publisher profiles, and pricing.

Customer Profiles

For the customer profile, Swets Information Services (Swets) and other agents have created e-resource profiles. In this profile is stored data such as IP ranges, registered platform providers, e-resource contact person with contact information, etc. When an order is placed with a publisher for an e-journal, either on the order or in a separate document will be the customer’s e-resource profile. The publisher will then know the IP range for the e-journal and also where to send access credentials and other information.

Catalog Title Listings

Subscription agents’ catalogs have expanded exponentially in order to provide for the numerous format options. For a single title, there could be as many as ten different options for selection. With tiered pricing, agents must show all of the tiers available and in a limited space provide a succinct description of the options. The tiers used to relate to the type of ordering institution (individual, academic, corporate, government, etc.), but the interpretation has changed over time. Tiers are now defined by a variety of factors, such as an institution’s total FTEs, FTEs involved in a specific discipline (like Health), Carnegie Classification, usage, the type of medical institution (teaching hospital, clinical hospital), etc. As publishers moved from a single subscription pricing (same price for all) to a tiered pricing policy for electronic subscriptions, some publishers did not assign a tier to each subscription, defaulting to the agent to make the initial decision. Others provided a spreadsheet listing the current subscribers, making it easy for agents to set up the orders. Despite this, Swets still receives conflicting information; one day an institution may be at one tier and the next day at another. As a result, Swets has our BEAM (Bibliographic E-Access Management) team determine the correct tier or subscription level.

Of course, tiers and policies vary from publisher to publisher. Just keeping track of what is available is a demanding and complex job. In addition, as titles move from one publisher to another publisher with a different policy, we can no longer just move the subscription to the new title record. We must now analyze each subscription, consult with the customer if necessary, and go through the entire reordering process, providing new activation information.

If the Swets’ system, we also store licenses

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