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Keeping Tabs on Publishers

With physical collections, library buildings served two purposes: making content available for local use in a pleasant setting, and preserving that content. With digital collections, both those purposes are radically altered. So the question libraries ask themselves is whether it is still their job to safeguard the content. A logical question to ask is whether the content will be adequately preserved if the library chooses to focus elsewhere. This is an important question, but in a kind of distant, theoretical sense. Generally speaking, it appears that there are enough efforts underway and enough responsible parties stepping up to tackle this problem, that the preservation question is answered. Digital copies of published content are being stored in many places, in many countries, and on many different servers. And the same content is being stored in print archives by responsible initiatives. The responsible library task is therefore not necessarily to locally archive content, but to keep track of archiving by publishers and insist on information from publishers about their archiving initiatives. For information on developments in this area, follow the work of the Piloting an E-Journals Preservation Registry Service (PEPRS) project at the University of Edinburgh (http://edina.ac.uk/projects/peprs_summary.html).

The most important question for each purchasing library is therefore not whether the record of human publishing and achievement will be preserved perpetually, but whether content will be available to the local library’s users.

So what are the potential obstacles to local access to paid content? The most likely is the inability to continue subscribing to content and the consequent possibility of a loss of back access. To safeguard against this outcome, libraries must negotiate into licenses fair clauses assuring back access in the event that the library is unable to pay for some or all of their subscribed content. There is not complete consensus on what is fair in this regard, but one view is that back access to previously paid content should continue on the publisher server for as long as the library continues to purchase at least some content from the publisher. From this perspective, it is only after the complete severance of a financial relationship that a reasonable “server maintenance” fee should be instituted by the publisher for ongoing access. Since publishers want the most access on their own servers as possible, it is unwise to redirect clients to another provider until absolutely necessary.

Another possible problem can arise when content shifts from one publisher to another. Inconvenience may happen in the form of twice for the same content. Note that this differs from a shift of content among publishers, but it pays to know which publishers are actually signatories to the Transfer Code. Inconvenience may happen in the form of needing to adjust a pointer or linking service to a different platform, but that is different than complete loss of access under threat of paying twice for the same content. Note that this differs from paying for digital archives of “born print” content, where the associated fees are for the value-added processes of digitization and aggregation.

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