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An Evaluation of ReadCube as an Interlibrary Loan Alternative

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Abstract

Libraries are continually searching for more affordable ways to provide access to research materials. The rising costs of journal subscriptions, site licenses, and interlibrary loan have made libraries look for new methods of providing those materials. In 2014, Auburn University Libraries began a pilot project to test the feasibility of using ReadCube, an article delivery service, as a method of patron-driven acquisition for scholarly journal articles. ReadCube allows users immediate access to articles from Nature Publishing Group journals at a lower cost than document delivery, but with usage restrictions.

This case study evaluates ReadCube as an alternative to interlibrary loan by comparing the costs and usage of ReadCube Access to those of interlibrary loan. Users were also surveyed to determine their satisfaction with ReadCube. The results indicate that ReadCube is a cost-effective method of obtaining Nature articles, although some users have reservations about the usage restrictions.

Introduction

Auburn University Libraries began a project in 2014 with ReadCube Access, an unmediated document delivery service for articles in Nature Publishing Group journals. As in many libraries, Auburn's budget remains flat while journal subscription costs continue to rise and the Libraries are continually looking for ways to provide more access at a reasonable cost. ReadCube is one approach to providing access to research journals without the cost of a new subscription.

Before contracting with ReadCube, researchers at Auburn University used interlibrary loan (ILL) to acquire articles from unsubscribed Nature journals. While ILL provides reliable access to articles, it has certain drawbacks. Copyright costs for articles can be substantial, staff time is required to process requests, and delivery to users is not immediate. A report at the Charleston Conference in 2013 by Jones and England described a trial of ReadCube Access, a new model of patron-driven acquisition for journal articles, at the University of Utah (Jones & England, 2014). After analyzing ILL costs for Nature journals, the Libraries began a trial with ReadCube Access in January 2014. Although limited to Nature Publishing Group journals, ReadCube appeared to a good fit for the Libraries' needs, and the Libraries contracted with ReadCube in March 2014.

How ReadCube Works

ReadCube Access is a patron-driven document delivery service for libraries. Originally developed by Labtiva, ReadCube is owned by Digital Science, a division of MacMillan Publishers and a sister company of Nature Publishing Group ("Introducing ReadCube," 2014). The ReadCube platform is a group of products that includes ReadCube Access as well as the ReadCube client, a free reference management system, the ReadCube Web Reader, a PDF reader integrated into the Nature Publishing Group's journal websites, and other tools and services. ReadCube provides enhanced PDFs which have such features as clickable references, supplements and other related materials, and the ability to highlight and make notes in the PDF.

Currently, for libraries, only articles from Nature journals are available through ReadCube Access. Articles from over 100 Nature journals are offered through ReadCube and libraries may select which Nature journals are available to their users. ReadCube is IP-based and users must be on campus or use a proxy server or virtual private network (VPN) to download articles.

Three levels of download are offered. In exchange for lower costs, articles from the lower two tiers come with certain rights restrictions. The library subsidizes the rental or purchase price of articles

and may choose which levels of download are presented to their patrons:

- 48-hour rentals (\$3.99). The article must be downloaded and read in the ReadCube reader and is only available for 48 hours. No printing is allowed.
- Cloud purchase (\$9.99). The article must be downloaded and read in the ReadCube reader. The article is saved indefinitely to the user's ReadCube cloud account. Printing is allowed.
- Unrestricted download (\$25). The article is downloaded without digital rights restrictions and may be printed and saved.

When a user selects an article from a journal on the Nature Publishing Group website, he or she sees an icon indicating that an enhanced PDF is available. After clicking on the icon, the first page of the article is displayed and the user is given the choice of renting or purchasing an article (Figure 1). He is then prompted to log in to his existing ReadCube account or to establish one. After the user logs in to his account, download is immediate and the library is billed for the article. After the article is downloaded, ReadCube queries the Libraries' link resolver to check whether the article is available through subscription or an aggregator. If it is available, the library is not charged for the article. By going through a library's link resolver, ReadCube works as an unmediated document delivery service since libraries will not be charged for articles already available to users.

Figure 1. The ReadCube application showing the article purchase choices.

ReadCube offers much-reduced costs for Nature articles, especially when compared to ILL copyright charges. According to the CONTU (Commission on New Technological Uses of Copyrighted Works) guidelines, each year a library may borrow five articles published within the last five years from a journal without incurring copyright fees. However, for the sixth and subsequent articles, libraries must seek permission, usually through the Copyright Clearance Center, and pay copyright charges (United States Copyright Office, 2005). For Nature Publishing Group journals, the fee for each article

is \$35.50. All three levels of download offered by ReadCube are less expensive than ILL after a title exceeds the five article request threshold.

The low price points are offered in exchange for usage restrictions on the two lower tiers of download (rental and cloud purchase). Rental articles may not be printed and both rental and cloud purchase articles must be read in the ReadCube client rather than downloaded as a PDF which can be saved anywhere. To libraries, despite the restrictions, ReadCube seems very appealing—lower costs and immediate access to

articles for users. However, users may not view the restrictions as acceptable.

To evaluate the project, the Libraries wanted to answer several questions. Is ReadCube financially sustainable? Will users misuse the availability of the articles and download unacceptable numbers? Do researchers find the ReadCube platform acceptable? Is ReadCube an adequate substitute for ILL?

ReadCube and Auburn University Libraries

Auburn University is a land-grant institution located in Auburn, Alabama, with significant research programs in science and technology fields. The University has 25,000 students, of whom 5,000 are graduate students, 1,200 faculty, 140 undergraduate majors and graduate study in over 110 areas, and professional schools of Pharmacy and Veterinary Medicine. Auburn University Libraries is an ARL library with a serials budget of over \$7,000,000.

The Libraries subscribe to 24 of the over 100 Nature journals listed on the nature.com website. The Libraries elected to provide ReadCube access to 83 Nature journals; that is, all Nature journals to which they do not subscribe or which are not completely available through open access or an aggregator. The Libraries chose to only offer the 48-hour rental (\$3.99) and the cloud purchase options (\$9.99).

In 2013, the Libraries received 91 ILL requests for articles from Nature journals and paid over \$3,000 in copyright charges. By using ReadCube, the Libraries anticipated that usage would go up because of the convenience of no longer having to

request articles through ILL, but believed that the costs would be manageable because of the reduced cost of each article.

ReadCube usage from March-September 2014 was compared to ILL requests for articles from Nature journals during March-September 2013. In 2014, the Libraries paid for 283 articles through the ReadCube application, 96 of which were 48-hour rentals and 187 of which were cloud purchases. (An additional 43 articles were downloaded but not paid for as they were available through aggregators or subscriptions. These articles were not included in the study.) During the same period in 2013, 42 articles were requested through ILL (Table 1). As expected, ReadCube usage was greater than ILL requests. Comparing the two years, the number of ReadCube purchases and rentals was nearly seven times the number of ILL requests.

The cost of ReadCube was also compared to the cost of copyright charges for ILL requests for Nature articles. Copyright fees for March-September 2013 ILL requests were \$1,313.50 while ReadCube costs for the same period in 2014 were \$2,251.17 (Table 1). The total price of purchases and rentals from Readcube in March-September 2014 was nearly twice that of the copyright charges paid for Nature articles during the same period in 2013. However, while the overall costs were higher, usage was greatly increased and the price per article was much lower for ReadCube. The average cost per article was \$31.27 for ILL requests (not including staff costs or other charges) and \$7.95 for ReadCube purchases, making the average cost of acquiring a Nature article through ILL nearly four times as expensive as downloading it through ReadCube.

Table 1
ReadCube uses and costs compared to ILL requests and costs

	March	April	May	June	July	August	Sept.	Total
2013 ILL Requests	4	7	9	3	8	7	4	42
2014 ReadCube Uses	19	65	37	29	34	40	59	283
2013 ILL Copyright Costs	\$106.50	\$248.50	\$319.50	\$35.50	\$213.00	\$248.50	\$142.00	\$1,313.50
2014 ReadCube Costs	\$183.81	\$595.35	\$327.63	\$265.71	\$225.66	\$261.60	\$391.41	\$2,251.17

Table 1. ReadCube uses and costs compared to ILL requests and costs.

Although the Libraries were initially concerned that individuals would download great numbers of articles because they were easily available, for the most part this turned out not to be a problem. Fifty-four percent of users downloaded only one article and 92% percent of users downloaded five or fewer articles (Figure 2). However, one user downloaded 32 articles for a cost of \$279.72. With an unmediated system, potential for abuse exists, but the Libraries consider the overall level of usage acceptable.

Figure 2. Number of ReadCube downloads per user. 92% of users downloaded five or fewer articles.

User Feedback

To assess the ReadCube project, a short survey was sent to all 153 registered users (Appendix 1). Eighteen responses were received for a return rate of 11%. While a small sample, it did provide some insight into users' impressions of ReadCube.

When the Libraries began the ReadCube project, it was promoted through email announcements, by subject librarians, and on the Libraries' website, but over half of the respondents reported learning about ReadCube only by seeing the icon on the journal article. One-third of the respondents reported having no difficulties using ReadCube but other users reported having problems such as difficulty printing and viewing articles, difficulty navigating the ReadCube application, and access links not working. When asked "What do you see as the greatest benefit to ReadCube?" the majority of the respondents mentioned having access to articles that they would not have access to otherwise. Another person mentioned that they liked the "highlighting, direct links to the references, and ability [to] save with notes" that are available in the ReadCube application. A

couple of other people, though, indicated that they preferred other reference managers. Another comment damned with faint praise. "I suppose if it's the only way to access a paper it's better—barely better—than having to request it through ILL."

In response to the question "What is the biggest challenge to using ReadCube?," half of the respondents mentioned problems with printing. Comments like "Unable to print some/all articles that I have accessed using it. Able to read but cannot print" were typical. Anecdotally, librarians reported that users had found printing a problem so these comments were not unexpected. Some of the ReadCube printing issues have been resolved, so user education may alleviate some of the difficulties.

A number of respondents questioned why they could not just download a PDF, rather than having to save a copy to the ReadCube reader or client. Comments such as "Printing and not being able to save a pdf. That is completely ridiculous. I shouldn't have to log on a website to access an IMPORTANT reference," and "It's good, but what's wrong with just viewing a PDF?" indicate that users do not understand why the Libraries are utilizing ReadCube. Some users may wonder, not unreasonably, why they are required to log in to an additional application when other journals require only a click to download a PDF. If the Libraries provided the more expensive unrestricted level of ReadCube download, users could download a PDF that could be saved anywhere. However, at \$25 per download and at the current level of usage, ReadCube would no longer be financially sustainable. Education about how ReadCube works and the costs of journal subscriptions may help users understand the financial reasons why the Libraries are utilizing ReadCube.

Conclusion

Auburn University Libraries has found ReadCube Access to be an acceptable alternative to interlibrary loan. The Libraries believe ReadCube provides much more access at a reasonable cost. Although the amount spent to acquire Nature articles was nearly twice that of ILL costs in the

previous year, users downloaded nearly seven times the number of articles at a much lower average cost per article. Very little abuse of the system was seen during the study and 92% of users downloaded five or fewer articles. While users have some concerns about the platform and

usage restrictions, they appreciate the access to articles that they would not otherwise have. At the current level of cost and usage, the Libraries consider ReadCube financially sustainable and good value for the investment.

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Appendix

Readcube Survey

Welcome to the Readcube Survey for Auburn University Libraries.

Are you 19 years of age or older?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If No Is Selected, Then Skip to End of Survey

Have you used Readcube?

- ☐ Yes, I have successfully viewed and/or printed article(s) through Readcube
- ☐ I have tried to use Readcube but was not able to view and/or print the articles I needed
- ☐ No, I have not tried to use Readcube to view and/or print articles

If No, I have not tried to use... Is Selected, Then Skip to How did you learn about Readcube?

Please select any difficulties you have encountered while using Readcube.
Choose all that apply.

- ☐ Access links not working
- ☐ Problems with viewing articles
- ☐ Problems with printing articles
- ☐ Difficulty navigating Readcube app
- ☐ None
- ☐ Other (please specify) _____

How many articles have you viewed in Readcube during the past year?

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2 to 3
- ☐ 4 to 6
- ☐ 7 to 10
- ☐ more than 10

How many articles have you printed from Readcube during the past year?

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2 to 3
- ☐ 4 to 6
- ☐ 7 to 10
- ☐ more than 10

How did you learn about Readcube? Choose all that apply.

- ☐ From a librarian
- ☐ From a colleague
- ☐ From the library's website
- ☐ Saw icon on a journal article
- ☐ Other (please specify) _____

Have you used the Library's subject guide (<http://libguides.auburn.edu/readcube>) for Readcube?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

What do you see as the greatest benefit to Readcube?

What is the biggest challenge to using Readcube?

What is your academic status?

- ☐ Undergraduate Student
- ☐ Graduate Student
- ☐ Staff
- ☐ Faculty
- ☐ Other (please specify) _____

With which college or department or research unit are you associated?

Please use this space if you would like to make any additional comments about Readcube, AU libraries, or this study.

Thanks for completing this survey!