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Back Talk

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Back Talk

I Am Beginning to Hate Commercial E-Journals

by **Tony Ferguson** (Associate University Librarian, Columbia University) <ferguson@columbia.edu>

We are paying for only a few dozen commercial electronic journals but I am beginning to hate them already. Paying for them is a nightmare or rather I should say agreeing how much they are worth is a nightmare. Making them readily available to all of our patrons, not just those who plop down in front of dedicated terminals, is a nightmare. And making sure we are not giving away the farm when we sign license agreements is another nightmare. If I didn't already have a couple of mortgages and four kids in college, I would be loosing a lot of sleep over my job.

I am too young to remember the days when a library had direct subscriptions for every journal title. Now we rely upon periodicals vendors to do much of the work, I think what I hunger for is a vendor who will do all the work commercial e-journals seem to be requiring and let me get back to worrying more about user needs and collection content.

Recently a new consortium of which Columbia is a part, the Northeast Research Libraries Consortium (NERL), has been negotiating with an electronic journal publisher for group access to all of their journals. This publisher, which when compared with others of their craft, appears to be generously enlightened, wants to charge us enough to protect its existing revenue stream and to pay for the transition from print only publishing to print plus electronic publishing and presumably ul-

timately to electronic only or electronic plus print for the digitally challenged. They indicate they will sell us electronic versions of their journals for less than the previous print price, but that if we want both digital and print we must pay upwards of 15% more a year. This is a bitter pill since we are already asking our selectors to cancel many thousands of dollars of other subscriptions to make the books balance at the end of the fiscal year. But this isn't all: The publisher indicates we will have to pay for all the titles for which we had subscriptions in 1994 — presumably to make sure we don't go out and cancel subscriptions and rely upon the group access achieved through NERL. The problem is that we have canceled some of their titles since 1994. To go digital, we will have to reverse these earlier decisions and reinstate the canceled subscriptions. This is frustrating and I sense many librarians other than myself are feeling this frustration.

This frustration is reflected in guidelines that are being developed by a number of groups for the acquisition of digital forms of information. The prime example is the "Principles for Acquiring and Licensing Information in Digital Formats" document developed by the University of California Collection Development Committee. <<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Info/principles.html>> [Please note that the "T" has to be capitalized.]

Based upon this document and my own experience I would like to offer the following 10 commandments for acquiring electronic journals that I think we librarians should all obey:

We must —

1. Balance the need for experience with digital formats with the current needs of our users for content. There is much for us and our users to learn about electronic journals (See the Tulip experiment final report for an excellent overview of the lessons learned by the participating libraries: <<http://www.elsevier.nl:80/homepage/about/resproj/tulip.shtml>>), but we have to remember that while the transition to digital is fascinating to librarians, our users have goals that must be realized in the here and now.
2. Seek to help the many before the few since we lack funds to be everything for everyone. It is tempting to want to try out each new family or type of electronic journal, but we have to remember that we do not have unlimited selector or acquisitions resources. Collection development has always been making choices among largely good alternatives. This truth does not dissolve with the digital tomorrow.
3. Build in areas of critical mass. Everyone obeys the law of least resistance to one

degree or another. We cannot expect our users to jump through technological hoops to test out the few e-journals we might have collected for a particular subject when shelves of print journals are easily accessible.

4. Reject publisher attempts to link subscriptions to print and electronic versions of the same title. First of all we can't afford to pay more than what we are already paying, and second, it will restrict our future ability to cut whatever format proves superfluous.

5. Require publishers to give us permanent title to the information for which we pay. We cannot treat these journals like loose-leaf services that go back to the publisher when we cancel or they decide to end the product. These are journals and we should be able to get the information in an acceptable format for use as long as we feel the need.

6. Reject publisher requests that we be responsible for the behavior of our users. We can agree to help them prosecute those who break copyright law, but we cannot get into the business of checking everyone's identification or what they are doing with the information.

7. Reject publisher requests that we collect data for marketing analysis purposes. We are in the information delivery business and not the publishing business. If we provide marketing information, we should get paid for it and should not be asked to pay for the raw materials that produce the marketing information.

8. Reject e-journals that are platform or software bound. Our users and environments are too diverse to allow ourselves to get tied into just one way of doing anything.

9. Demand that these journals be easier and better to use than print journals. We cannot be seen as philanthropic foundations devoted to the dissemination of electronic information.

10. Require publishers and vendors to be completely up front with the who, what, when, and where of the archiving and preservation of these electronic journals. We cannot expend scarce funds on faith that someone will worry about it later.

These are all things we should do or which we should demand others to do. Most of them will prove somewhat difficult. Yet, if we will focus on these and other matters discussed in the California "Principles," our frustration with this new format that promises so much will be eased and our job of bringing people and information together will be more fun.

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