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The Role of the Modern Intermediary and What Constitutes Value in the Library of 2012

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First off, let’s talk about the current landscape for academic and academic research libraries in the United States of America. In regards to subscriptions, the majority of academic and academic research libraries now have 75-80% of their collections delivered electronically, and this is rapidly becoming true for monographic purchasing as well. At the same time, library budgets are best described as being fragile and not nearly as consistent as they were in previous decades. Many academic institutions in the United States have seen rapid declines in State funding support for public institutions. In many cases, the State funding support for higher education has dropped below 20%. In order to make up for this loss of funding support, public institutions have been raising tuition costs and trying to find new revenue streams through partnerships with private companies and corporations and research funding support. This has led many public institutions to adopt what is referred to as performance-based budgeting models in which departments within the institution are given funding based on credit hour generation and research grant funding. Since academic libraries are revenue-supported departments as opposed to being a revenue-generating department, their funding has become more reliant than ever on the overall financial well-being of the institution. In this environment, academic librarians are pressed more than ever to prove their value, and the return on investment of the collections is a crucial aspect to the story line of value to the academic health of the institution. In order to capitalize on the funding we do have, librarians and libraries are collaborating more than ever. My institution, located in the upper reaches of the Pacific Northwestern part of the United States, participates in the Orbis Cascade Alliance, which serves 37 institutions in three states. Recently, we have been participating in a couple of electronic resource deals that span the entire nation by consortia partnering with one another. In order for this type of collaboration to work, librarians are doing much of their work through cloud computing, shared documents, and email.

In this environment, librarians need better support from intermediaries regarding basic subscription maintenance. A new support role for intermediaries is to help librarians track where local faculty are publishing. As librarians start to work more closely with their research offices, being able to identify readily the interests and publication patterns occurring on their campuses is becoming very important. In order to prove value and the best return of investment of collections budget spend, librarians need help in identifying where there is overlap of subscription packages and aggregator content. Right now, the best tool for this type of information is being provided by JISC, in the UK. Libraries and librarians would also benefit from intermediary platforms that are not black boxes and stand-alone tools but rather integrate
with other library services and tools through APIs and cloud services. As mentioned above, consortium support is only going to become increasingly important and valuable as resource sharing expands within the United States.

There are three subscription maintenance stories that are worthwhile to present.

The first story is about the JSTOR Current Scholarship program that began to be promoted in 2010 with a go-live date for January 2011. After many pleas from librarians from many sectors, JSTOR/ITHAKA made a commitment to start providing current subscription access on their platform. As one of the oldest electronic resource platforms around, JSTOR has great brand recognition on academic campuses throughout North America, and this move to the impressive move of content is not always readily conveyed to the intermediaries that still list in their title database that much of this content was still on the Scitation platform, still listed in their title database that much of the information back to their home institutions, and while librarians experienced a loss of access to content they had previously held on a prior platform.

All in all, the conclusion from these stories is clear: subscription management in the electronic environment is still very much an issue and one in which intermediaries can improve their services to libraries and librarians.

As noted previously, librarians are now collaborating more than ever with their institutional research offices and are working hand-in-hand with these departments to better understand and track local publishing and research production. In part, this is being done to prove value to the institution but also in order to maximize the funding support and to try to best quantify research support from both areas. In this way both departments are working very closely with faculty. There is a unique role here for the intermediary in helping the library/librarians with local author tracking and local publication. This is an area where there could be growth for the intermediary if they can find a way to include such information within their title bases.

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added into our subscription reports from intermediaries. In these cases, librarians are looking at titles holistically, measures coupled with cost per use. In many cases, intermediaries are supplying this type of information to libraries, but again, if this can be built into their systems, it should be because this is part of the performance-based budget model being used in libraries today.

Librarians would love to have the ability to link data from an intermediary’s data system into local data systems and data management tools being used locally. We definitely need all the intermediaries using ONIX standards and EDIFact standards to insure seamless transfer of both subscription claims and invoicing. When we call up an internal service agent, we need to be speaking to someone who fully understands and comprehends the environment in which librarians work and does not appear baffled or befuddled by proxy services, OpenURL questions, or hosting service issues. If the intermediary’s title system can allow it, librarians would love to have a local data management space that is more free form and open for trying to configure the intermediary’s data in a localized way that works best for librarians. APIs that allow us to create a data bridge directly to a discovery system and/or ILS or other homegrown systematic management tool would also make it easier for us to slice, dice, and serve data in the myriad of ways we need for various audiences and various stories we tell about the library locally.

Lastly, the future of intermediaries depends on services that are fully open to consortia. Consortia partners need to be able to share data readily with other libraries and with the consortia managers. Each consortia library needs to have the flexibility to choose the intermediary of their choice or use multiple intermediaries as necessary. At the consortia level, being able to recognize what is held collectively and what is held locally is also a key component needed, and, along with this, being able to get usage information for both the consortia collectively and the individual institution is a must-have service. Consortia managers are especially in need of seeing cost information from multiple providers and being able to choose the best provider for the group as needed.

In conclusion, the modern intermediary should improve on current services being offered regarding journal transfer and subscription management and make sure service agents are well-versed in the library environments they serve. In addition, the modern intermediary should begin to develop new services around local publishing, subscription evaluation, data inter-operability, and consortia services. Intermediaries making improvements such as the ones noted above will continue to be a valued service to the academic library in the 21st century.

Author’s Biography
Jill Emery has over fifteen years of academic library experience at various higher education institutions in North America. She has served as chair of the ALA-ALCTS continuing resources committee (previously the serials section) and is a past president of the North American Serials Interest Group. She is the social media specialist for the Electronic Resources & Libraries, LLC and serves on the program planning committee for the annual conference. She is a current member of The Charleston Advisor editorial board and the columnist for Heard on the Net.