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Joyce L. Ogburn
Old Dominion University

Corinne Ebbs
James Madison University

Laurie Preston
James Madison University

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Acquiring Minds Want To Know

The "Fulltext" Question: A Study in Progress

Column Editor: **Joyce L. Ogburn** (AUL for Information Resources and Systems, Old Dominion University Library, Norfolk VA 23529; phone 804-683-4189; fax 804-683-5767 <ogburn@lib.odu.edu>)

by **Corinne Ebbs**

(Reference/Instruction Librarian
(540) 568-6054) <ebbscm@jmu.edu>
and

Laurie Preston

(Coordinator of Electronic
Reference Services
(540) 568-6907) <prestola@jmu.edu>
Carrier Library,
James Madison University,
Harrisonburg, Virginia 22807

The question of electronic access to journal literature is a critical one for libraries. Libraries are presented with two options for users: electronic journals or electronic fulltext. In approaching the question of whether electronic fulltext is a viable means of accessing journal literature, we systematically examined selected journal issues available both in print in our library and in fulltext through **IAC's Expanded Academic ASAP fulltext database**. Our sample involved looking at two issues from each of 75 journal titles (150 issues in all) with a balance of 25 titles from each broad subject division: Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, and Sciences.

Initially we compared tables of contents listings with the items indexed in the database to determine the extent of the fulltext coverage. It became apparent that this could not be a case of comparing numbers only because tables of contents are not indexes and vice versa. We expanded our analysis to an item by item comparison which showed interesting discrepancies between the formats, including the handling of book reviews, columns, references, editorials, letters, title variations, and other content differences. In many cases complete articles or major pieces of the article contents were missing in the fulltext database.

Another area of concern is the presence or absence of illustrations. Our initial work was conducted in a character-based environment using a telnet program which provided no illustrations at all. This concerned us as the content of many articles is severely undermined by the lack of important graphs, pictures, tables, diagrams, etc. In the middle of our study, IAC released their Web-based version which includes graphics retrievable in multiple forms. This alleviated one of the major flaws with fulltext that we reported on in a poster session presented at the ALA Annual Conference in New York, July 8, 1996. However, most of the fulltext

products from other vendors do not currently provide illustrations.

Traditional expectations of access to journal literature include prompt delivery, complete contents, no missing pages or issues, easy access, and relevance to a particular library's collection. At the time of our research, 43% of the most recent issues from our sample titles were indexed but not yet available in fulltext, even though the print issues had been received by our institution. We quickly became frustrated by the missing pieces and discovered gaps that involved whole issues, not just articles! This problem is prevalent in the fulltext environment and is not limited to IAC's databases. Access involves both technical and training issues too numerous to expand upon here. Currently, fulltext is only available as all-or-nothing. Journal



titles included as fulltext are determined by the vendor and dependent on their relationships with publishers. Libraries don't have title by title choice. The control over journal selection and retention shifts in the fulltext world from librarians and users to the publishers and vendors.

In this new paradigm the vendors are the vulnerable partner. They are caught between publishers' constraints and librarians' ill-defined expectations. We as professionals have to define and clarify our expectations of fulltext delivery. As representatives of diverse communities with differing needs, we must be able to make choices of materials to support our users. We need to assess and understand how people use journal literature and how value is assigned to journal information. Further, we need a mechanism to effectively convey this knowledge to our partners, the publishers and vendors of periodical literature.

A brief review of the literature indicates that economics are a strong factor contributing to publishers' decisions on what to release to vendors as fulltext. If economics are a driving force, how does this affect traditional methods of collection development which are based on qual-

ity and content? Can librarians be comfortable with the risk of moving substantial resources to fulltext databases without participating more fully in the selection and evaluation of the contents and retrieval methods? Our study shows that fulltext access is not the equivalent of print journal subscriptions. Fulltext article databases are primarily bibliographic indexes to which selected fulltext articles have been added. Currently the only electronic equivalent of a print journal is an electronic journal. This places responsibility on publishers, vendors, and librarians to clarify the fulltext vision.

We have noticed that there is a lack of communication about the meaning of the term fulltext. Publishers must be open about contractual and copyright agreements with vendors. Vendors must provide accurate information about the contents of their fulltext products to their customers. Librarians must understand the behavior patterns and needs of their users and must convey this information appropriately to vendors and publishers. They must also recognize the constraints inherent in the publishing business.

The information that we would find useful includes disclosure of any limitations within publisher-vendor contracts. Restrictions on syndicated columns, articles reprinted from other publications, individually copyrighted illustrations, and intellectual ownership of specific information should be clearly indicated to all parties. Information should be provided on fulltext release timing and on any publication changes including individual title additions/cessations and frequency of issues. Ideally, editorial staff and policies, author credentials, journal statements of purpose, and other relevant publication data would be easily accessible to users of any fulltext system. These observations point to the need for the publisher-vendor-librarian triad to collaboratively develop a more accurate and descriptive term to replace the misnomer "fulltext".

Column Editor's Note: The authors will be presenting a workshop entitled "FULL-TEXT" Access Evaluation: Are We Getting the REAL Thing?" at the Annual Meeting of NASIG in Ann Arbor (May 29-June 1, 1997) where they will review their findings and present a model for assessing the value of fulltext access. The authors also plan to publish their full results. — JAO