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Pay-Per-View at the American Institute of Physics: One Scholarly Publisher’s Experience with “The Article Economy”

by Douglas LaFrenier (Director, Publication Sales & Market Development, American Institute of Physics, 2 Huntington Quadrangle, Melville, NY 11747) <dlafrenier@aip.org>

D espite all the talk of the “article economy,” sales of single articles are a minor revenue source for scholarly publishers, who continue to rely on subscriptions and consortia deals for the vast majority of their income. (Publishers in some disciplines can count advertising as another source of revenue.) Yet the purchase of single articles obviously serves the needs of a significant number of users: My organization, the American Institute of Physics (AIP), for example, with a total article database of about 400,000 papers, sold an average of 560 articles per month from our Website in 2008. That does not include articles sold through third-party document delivery services, such as Infotrieve, CISTI, and the British Library.

AIP, as it happens, was one of the first two publishers to enable anyone with a credit card to buy any article online, back in April 1998. The American Chemical Society was the other, and ACS beat us to the punch by a matter of hours. (We lost the bragging rights that come with the first press release!) Since AIP’s online platform, Scitation, hosts many other not-for-profit society publishers, we enabled each of them to enter the online single-article marketplace as well. “E-commerce” was the heady talk of the day (this was before the dot.com bust around 2001), and publishers were pleased to have this new revenue stream from direct sales, though many undoubtedly expected more robust results.

In retrospect, the low number of direct article sales was partly due to the fact that we were still focused on “availability” and had not yet discovered “discoverability.” It took Google to teach us that.

Google is so much part of publishing DNA these days that it’s hard to remember how much resistance it met with originally. Publishers debated about allowing Google spiders to crawl our Websites for content — indeed, many publishers were still trying to build “portals” or “gateways” to corner online traffic in their disciplines. Why wouldn’t our users come directly to us for our content? Google was a game-changer if only because it caused a lot of us to rethink this strategy, and forced us — even the Society publishers whose brands are virtually synonymous with their subject matter, such as ACS or IEEE or the American Physical Society — to realize we were not the center of our universe. Once we permitted Google to index our content in 2003, the “Google effect” was plain to see: Before Google, our article sales were about $2500 a month; after Google indexed our content, sales rose fairly immediat...
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Aaron F. Nichols

BORN AND LIVED: Born and raised in Braintree, Massachusetts; a large town just outside of Boston.

EARLY LIFE: There was a time when blue crabs were abundant in the marsh by my aunt's house in Cape Cod. My brothers and cousins and I would catch them and bring our bounty back to our parents. They were always delighted.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: Since graduating from library school I have worked in three academic libraries. I love the spirit of innovation and the culture of forward-thinking that thrives in academic libraries. While a graduate student I had the honor and privilege to work for the Providence Athenaeum and Providence College – both in Providence, RI.

FAMILY: A wife and two young children.

IN MY SPARE TIME: While I'm not busy obsessing over the Red Sox, I like to bike (both mountain and road), run, hike, and eat fluffernutter sandwiches with my wife. Oh, and jigsaw puzzles. I'm also in graduate school at Boise State University, busy earning a Master's of Educational Technology. Every once in a while I'll brew some beer.


GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: As a personal goal I'd like to complete a triathlon. For a professional goal I'd really like to help change library services and facilities to make academic libraries indispensable to students and faculty.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: The academic library will switch from being a self-service information warehouse to becoming a full-service information service entity.

Articles On Demand (AOD). AIP certainly didn't pioneer this model; in fact, we were influenced by IEEE Enterprise, an article-bundle product that IEEE created for its own corporate market. I'd like to take a moment to explain how this product works, since there is an intense interest in alternative purchasing models in the wake of the global recession.

AIP Articles On Demand (see https://www.associationsciences.org/aod) offers article bundles in sizes of 500 (for $5000), 250 ($2750), 100 ($1200), and 50 ($650), so the price per article ranges from $10 to $13 depending on the size of the bundle. (Note that AIP's single-article fee is $24.00.) These rates are higher than what an individual would pay for an AIP Article Pack, but the AOD product has benefits for institution-wide use:

• Libraries (or whoever may fill this role in a small company) choose the size of the bundle they want, and create a deposit account with AIP from which each download is debited. They thus eliminate the need to pay for each individual transaction and have a more subscription-like relationship with the publisher.
• Libraries have a password-protected, Web-based Account Manager that allows them to track each article purchased, maintain a running list linked to the article abstracts, monitor download activity, and replenish the AOD account online whenever necessary.

• Users are IP-authenticated and can freely search across AIP's database of journals, conference proceedings, and magazines, downloading any article of interest. Their experience is very much like any user at an academic institution with an AIP subscription. None of the behind-the-scenes, debit-by-download activity is apparent to them.

• Any article, once downloaded, is available without further charge to any other user in the company. No one pays twice for the same article.

• The librarian not only can follow the research interests of their staff scientists by monitoring the downloads, they can also receive COUNTER statistics, which allows them to monitor uses of abstracts, tables of contents, and searches, as well.

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A very mixed “economy” of—  

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The broader answer is that AIP already practices differential pricing. We tier our journal prices according to the research levels of our subscribers, so that smaller, less research-intensive institutions pay less than bigger, more research-intensive institutions. Academic institutions with consortia licenses to AIP content pay differently than single-site subscribers. Institutions in emerging economies pay little, or nothing, to access AIP content. We want to offer our content in whatever way best suits the needs, interests, and budgets of our customers. While we do fear cannibalizing our bread-and-butter subscriptions by offering an article-bundle product to academia, we are also — librarians and publishers alike — moving to more evidence-based metrics of price and performance. COUNTER is the key initiative here, but measures of quality (whether Impact Factor or eigenvalues or h-indexes or the next new thing) will matter, too. It is not hard to imagine the near-future, when an information provider and an information consumer will together find an optimal way to deliver content not for the cheapest price, but for the best value. Subscriptions, site licenses, customer-owned-and-operated archives, author- or funder-paid open access, article-based deposit accounts — all of these options will be part of the menu of access models available to the librarian in the brave new world that is right around the corner.

What Future do We See for Products Like AIP Articles On Demand? Will We Offer it to Academic Institutions as well as Corporations?

Is Deep Dyve Another Game-changer?

As I was writing this article, Deep Dyve announced a pay-per-view service that will charge only 99 cents an article for a 24-hour “rental.” This has been called an “iTunes-like” model, but users cannot download or save the article — it literally is “pay per view,” since the only thing the buyer can do is read the article onscreen. Deep Dyve also offers $9.99 per month and $19.99 per month subscriber plans with more user rights than the 99 cents per article option. But it is clearly the 99 cents price point that has attracted everyone’s attention. Publishers’ single-article fees tend to be high enough not to undermine the value of a subscription. But such formulations derive from the print era, where single-article sales were all done by third parties and were hard for a publisher to regulate or monitor. The article economy in the days of print was thus largely an “invisible” economy, which publishers feared more than encouraged. In the current online era, when article sales can be much more effectively tracked, the new Deep Dyve model offers an experiment that many publishers will want to join. If Deep Dyve can get enough publishers involved to achieve the same kind of comprehensive service that Amazon provides for books, it could become an enormously significant player. Sure, we’re all nervous about cannibalizing subscriptions — but in a moment of huge economic uncertainty for our traditional revenue streams, experiments like this may be the only way to find new and sustainable business models.

Rumors from page 26

Prior to joining ProQuest, Rod worked for the Thomson Corporation for ten years and has held a variety of sales, marketing and publishing positions with Addison Wesley, Prentice Hall, and W.H. Freeman. He received his BA degree in political science from Assumption College, in Worcester, Massachusetts. I also found out that Rod was born in Canada but has Louisiana roots as well. What you don’t learn from people when you have time to listen!

I don’t think I told you all about seeing the gorgeous Kathy Ray at the Acquisitions Conference in Oxford, England last year! Did I? Kathy was one of the excellent speakers at this Conference and I discovered that she is married to Ron Ray once of University of the Pacific! Ron has left libraries and is now working in IT and he and Kathy are located in beautiful, exotic Sarjah in the United Arab Emirates. Talk about glamorous!

And, guess who else has traveled to foreign parts? The industrious Joseph J. Brannin has continued on page 61.

Doug LaFrenier

BORN AND LIVED: I was born in Massachusetts as an “Army brat” and grew up on Army bases around the country. I attended 10 schools in the 12 grades.  

FAMILY: I’m married and we have four cats.  

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: I started out as a copywriter of book jackets for Macmillian. Worked for McGraw-Hill and Scientific American, and had my own freelance copywriting business for several years.  

IN MY SPARE TIME: We spend weekends at our house in the Catskills, which I’ve been fixing up for years.  

FAVORITE BOOKS: A recent one is Cloud Atlas.  

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: Retire.  

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: A very mixed “economy” of subscription-based and OA research content. Best subscription-based journals will continue to attract high quality authors but the sheer volume of research will require more non-traditional publishing. Peer review will still be important.

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