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Electronic journal registering and access in an academic library

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There are a variety of ways in which a library can acquire electronic journals, including through aggregations^[1] as well as individually selected titles, both paid for and gratis. This paper focuses on individual web-based full-text scholarly journals where online access is bundled with a current print subscription. This narrow approach has been taken because this subset of the electronic journal universe forms a discrete group with its own problems and procedures and also because the latest Swets Blackwell survey of publishers' pricing conditions indicates a steady increase of the percentage offering bundled online access with print (Swets Blackwell 2001). Even this subset is fluid, however, as some publishers inaugurate online delivery by bundling access with a print subscription, then re-evaluate after a few years and offer online access for a surcharge or as an alternative to a print subscription.

Those publishers offering online access bundled with a print subscription do so in an astonishing variety of ways. Some allow site access, some restrict access to the building in which the print subscription is housed, some restrict access to one workstation. Some allow one, or three or five simultaneous users. Some allow **one** person in the institution to have access - not one simultaneous user but one identified person. Sometimes the very limited online access appears (to these authors at least) to be done in the hope that libraries will be induced to expand access through payment of a site licence.

Critical issues

Activation of electronic access

Activation of the online component of a bundled journal subscription is not as simple as publishers claim on their websites. There is a lot of behind-the-scenes work involved to make the online component accessible. While the same argument could be made for their print equivalents, the processes involved with print are now well established and integrated into the standard workflows of all parties involved in the supply chain: publishers, subscription agents² and libraries. The perception in the academic library world is that 'E-journals are very frustrating to manage. They are far more time consuming ... than any of our print subscriptions' (McElroy, 2000).

Acquiring the customer number

In order to register the institution for access to the online component of a bundled journal subscription, the staff member responsible needs to acquire the customer number³ assigned to the institution for the title by the publisher. Frequently, publishers place this number on the mailing wrapper of each print issue, but in large libraries the issues usually are unwrapped and the wrappers discarded before delivery of the issues to the staff who undertake registration tasks. One option to solve this problem is to insert a note in the staff display of the catalogue record for the title alerting check-in staff to keep the wrapper from the next print issue and forward it to registration staff.

A better option is to interrogate the database of the subscription agent in case the number can be found

there. In the late 90s, this approach would have had limited success, but over the past twelve to eighteen months the situation has improved markedly, with most agents now routinely acquiring these numbers and placing them in their databases.

Other options are to contact the agent or the publisher, providing details of the library's right to register (such as payment details). These latter options are also more likely to bear fruit than they did in the late 90s, where answers such as, 'There is no electronic subscription number' were frustratingly common. There is still a long way to go before procedures are as streamlined as they are for print journals, however, and librarians can still be driven to extreme lengths in their search for the elusive customer number. One of the authors recently received the following e-mail:

'Now the online version of your journal is published via Ingenta and I want to ask you, if you could tell us the corresponding subscriber number so that we could make the registration for this title. Without subscriber number we aren't able to offer the online versions to our users. Thank you so much for your efforts.'

(The University is not the publisher of the title the e-mailer from Europe wanted and the author referred her to the publisher. Identifying elements of the e-mail have been deleted to preserve the anonymity of the e-mailer.)

Registration

In most cases, publishers require registration for the site to be undertaken by one authorised staff member, who then becomes the administrator and the contact between the publisher and the institution. There is a need for stringent recording measures, as processes vary from publisher to publisher. As one respondent to the Management of E-Journals Survey put it, 'Without copious notes you are lost. Even with copious notes it is like managing 100-400 people working on their own agendas' (McElroy, 2000). Publisher contact details, access mechanisms and licence restrictions must all be organised into readily accessible files, along with administrator passwords and any necessary instructions. The staff display of the serials catalogue records gives useful locations for this information. Printed history files could also be maintained.

Finding and then filling out electronic registration forms online and registering (and **re-registering**) institutional details in the various configurations required under different publisher plans is tedious and time consuming. Some publisher's websites are a confusing nightmare to navigate in order to locate the appropriate online forms; some publishers' instructions are more arcane than others, and some publishers are unresponsive to problems.

The necessity for re-registration was noted as a problem by three-quarters of the respondents to the above-mentioned survey on the management of E-journals. Mostly the requirement is not caused by a deliberate policy of the publisher, but there is at least one publisher (which shall be nameless!), who demands, as a completely separate activity from the subscription payment, that the subscribing library fill in a three page registration form each year, otherwise the online access disappears. At least when subscription problems are encountered with print titles, the back issues are still accessible on the shelves.

Other common problems

When online access continues smoothly and seamlessly, library processes are more or less invisible. But when something goes wrong, the processes become glaringly obvious and much time is expended on troubleshooting.

The difficulties commonly reported include:

- the publisher has not received (or cannot find) payment details for the library's subscription and bars online access as well as ceasing print supply;
- publisher inefficiency such as backlogs of subscription renewals awaiting processing, lack of communication between different offices, either geographical or functional;
- poor communication between library, publisher, subscription agent and (where present) interface host;
- a change in a library's subscription agent causes confusion at the publisher end; and
- the library moves to a consolidation service for its journal supply.

Any of these common problems can (and do) cause major disruptions to online access. The problems are by no means unique to southern hemisphere sites, far from the centres of publishing, but are global in nature. The University of Melbourne has experienced all these difficulties, the worst being the unforeseen consequences of a decision taken in 1999 to move to a consolidation service for journal supply. Instead of receiving issues directly from the publisher, they were routed through subscription agents. Publishers frequently considered these as new subscriptions, and assumed we had cancelled **our** subscriptions. Our online access to the titles vanished and after two months of frantic investigation, we discovered that the reason was that the publishers had assigned us new customer numbers, and we had to completely re-register our online access using these new numbers.[4](#)

Some examples from European libraries help to broaden the picture:

'Owing to a change of subscription agent, the publisher is unable to link the library that discontinued the subscription through agent X to the library that subscribed to the same journal through agent Y.' (Martellini, 2000)

'A publisher got our cheque in October but because of a backlog in their accounts department didn't process it until February - and expired our electronic access at the end of January. Not only that but they refused to restore it until the backlog was cleared and the cheque was banked (even though they knew it was there), or to compensate us for the period of access we lost through **their** inefficiency.' (Taylor 2001)

'We have had several cases this year and last where problems in the annual renewal of the print subscription have led to the loss of access to the electronic journal. In some cases we have lost access to the whole online content or have lost access to the current year only. However, the first we usually have known about it is when our users report the loss of access to the journal concerned to us.' (Crawshaw 2001)

Use of subscription agents

Some agents are better than others at providing information. Some send regular circulars indicating the status of online access. This can be helpful not only because publishers do not always keep their websites up-to-date, but also because it is not unknown for them to retain conflicting messages on different parts of their websites.

There are mixed feelings in the library community about involving a library's subscription agents as intermediaries in the processes for anything more than providing subscription details and customer numbers to publisher and library. Under half of the respondents in the aforementioned survey agreed that activation of e-journals is easier with a subscription agent and saves time in managing than going directly to a publisher (McElroy, 2000).

One view is that the chain of communication from library to publisher to interface supplier is already sufficiently long and unwieldy without adding another link:

'Using this method [registration by the library, not the subscription agent] is the only currently available way whereby I can retain at least some control over the process of providing web access to journals. ... The alternative of leaving everything to the subscription agent and a host of different publishers to sort out among themselves means that everything would disappear into a black hole, and I would not know when access has been set up or why it had failed, let alone what I could do to change things.' (Johns 2001).

Monitoring

With print subscriptions, staff need to monitor for non-arrival of issues. With electronic journals, there is a wide range of problems which require remedial action, including:

- failure to renew a subscription (on the part of the library or the agent);
- failure to pay the renewal invoice (on the part of the library or the agent);[\[5\]](#)
- change of publisher for the title;[\[6\]](#)
- change of website for the title;

- change of URL for the title; or
- server downtime.

Possible solutions

Interruptions in access such as those outlined in this paper make academic staff hesitant to embrace electronic-only journal subscriptions. One option open to individual libraries is to register for access to a title on as many sites as possible. For example, directly on the publisher's website, but also through an interface hosting service, such as **Ingenta**. That way, if one site is down, or slow at loading a new issue, the other site offers an alternative. This option, however, increases the workload for the library, and also confuses the users, as they do not know which access point to use.

A more comprehensive, though long-term, solution is for all parties in the supply chain to agree on improved communication systems and streamlined processes to ensure smooth and seamless delivery of electronic journals. Some publishers are already improving their registration procedures and their level of service. The site established by Oxford University Press early in 2001 especially for librarians includes an e-mail alerting service providing changes to the OUP journals list, changes to URLs, new services, and special offers. Some other publishers are also becoming much more responsive to problems.[\[7\]](#)

Ingenta, a major e-journal hosting service, is likewise aware of the need to improve both communication and processes, especially since its recent merger with Catchword.[\[8\]](#) [\[9\]](#) [\[10\]](#)

Conclusion

Access to an ever-increasing array of electronic journals has provided our customers, suppliers and ourselves with the opportunity to experiment with the novel means of access that these electronic versions permit, and a chance to develop our skills in preparation for a concerted move to electronic provision of information over the next few years. Improving communication flows and deeper understanding of the problems facing each link on the chain should ensure that within the next couple of years the trials and tribulations outlined in this paper are but dim memories in the minds of all players.

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Footnotes

1. The term is used to refer to a number of different entities:

- serials vendors such as Swets Blackwell;
- article aggregators such as Proquest;
- publishers bundling all their titles into a set where you must buy all their journals, for example, Academic Press' ill-named IDEAL;
- firms which provide technical support, including web loading for publishers too small to want to load their titles onto their own web page, such as Ingenta;
- OVID, which aggregates both abstracting and indexing tools and full text journals.

2. Subscription agents may also be confusingly referred to as vendors or aggregators.

3. This number is also known as the subscription number, activation key, access keyword, or similar appellation. (This number must not be confused with the customer number assigned by the subscription agent.)

4. Two e-mails from the United Kingdom indicate a similar situation for United Kingdom libraries:

- 'We moved to consolidation for some titles in January and are still [in July] sorting out access problems, mainly due to publishers thinking our subscriptions have been cancelled and not tying in the new order (in the agents name) with us. You then have to prove/persuade/convince the publisher, usually via the agent and numerous e-mails to both, that you still have a current sub to their titles **before** you even get to the stage of finding out the magical subscription number.' (Houston 2001).
- 'We have long used [vendor's name] consolidation service and getting proof of current subscription for electronic access entitlement where granted is often time-consuming and repetitive. ...Given publishers often want confirmations either by copies of invoices or 'subscription numbers', using consolidation means we often don't have this as discrete (that is, title-by-title) information. So our [vendor contact] has to do the confirmation for us.' (Eaton 2001).

5 Example: 'Since publishers are now employing different cut-off dates beyond which access to the journal is terminated if the subscription is not renewed it is getting harder and harder to identify where there could be problems with loss of access to the full text.' (Crawshaw 2001)

6 Example: 'Recently, one of our patrons pointed out to us that a ... journal to which we had been linking had vanished off the airwaves. After some research, everyone concerned realised that the title had been sold ... and that we had access to the title again through a different interface.' (Parker 2001)

7 Example: 'I am sorry to hear that you are having problems accessing the on-line version of **Learning & Memory**, to which you subscribe. I am working with our Fulfilment department to determine where the error occurred. It does occasionally happen that a renewal payment sent by a subscriber to an agent ... is not correctly identified to us by the agent, and thus the payment is mistakenly processed as a new subscription. This may be what has happened in your case. We are currently 'tracing back' to see where and how your payment was applied, and will be in touch with you as soon as possible, so that you may resume access to L&M.' (Cantwell 2001)

8 Example: 'We are striving to improve our systems and processes to make accessing your subscriptions as easy and as straightforward as possible. We are also developing new modules for librarians so they can check our records of their subscriptions more easily.' (Morrow 2001)

9 Example: 'I have enabled full online access to **Biochemical Journal** therefore you should have no problem downloading articles now. I have also attached your subscription file showing all titles we have set

up for online access. If there are any titles missing, or years missing please let us know and we'll contact the publisher on your behalf for confirmation of your subscription. Again, our apologies.' (Bellamy 2001)

10 Example: 'I'm sorry that you have found this element of Ingenta's service difficult and frustrating - but be assured that we are striving to improve our systems and processes to make accessing your subscriptions as easy and as straightforward as possible. We are also developing new modules for librarians so they can check our records of their subscriptions more easily.' (Morrow 2001)

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<http://www.alia.org.au/publishing/alj/50.4/full.text/electronic.journals.html>

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