

# THE DISINCENTIVE OF E-ONLY

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## Abstract

This paper outlines the issues libraries face as they consider the transition from print (or hybrid) to electronic-only for journal literature. Although many library managers – in particular in the STM area – are keen to move as swiftly as possible to e-only, there is a series of drawbacks and problems which need to be addressed.

This paper uses the three headings of *Space*, *Costs* and *Availability* to explore and discuss these issues. Even though there are many advantages in moving to e-only, there are also many disadvantages which make it more difficult to promote and can lead to serious delays in the transition process.

The author is writing with Oxford University in mind, but the issues are applicable to all major academic libraries.

The main STM publishers, together with the STM libraries, are leading the way towards e-only. It is anticipated that Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities will follow sooner or later, as availability of current and retrospective e-journal coverage in these subject areas continue to improve. Experiences made in the STM libraries will be invaluable to other subject areas as they move forward during the next years.

## 1 Space

All libraries face space problems as print collections continue to grow. Despite the serial crisis, there is no visible evidence that the number of serials is reducing. And although some journals emerge as e-only journals, nearly all established journals continue to be published in print (and online). It can be assumed that journal publishers will continue to print periodicals as long as there is a market for them.

However, with so many libraries facing space problems and increasing internal or external storage charges, e-only is becoming an attractive option.

E-only collections can help tackle the space problem in two ways. On the one hand, the replacement of a *current print subscription* by an e-only subscription can reduce the space needed for the current journal display. As the number of readers browsing current journal issues decreases, libraries can consider re-using these areas for computer clusters, information commons or other new services. Current journal displays are normally in prime locations, so the freeing up of these areas is a particularly interesting issue as libraries rethink their use of space.

On the other hand, the purchase of *back files* can help free up long shelf runs of journals. These back files come at a price, as they normally have to be purchased in addition to the current access, but they offer significant long-term advantages. Although it was always thought that STM readers focus primarily on the current content, it is surprising how many are interested in having access to back volumes.

The fact that e-only can alleviate or solve space crises seems uncontroversial: librarians at all levels and in all subject areas would agree to this fact. However, this does not mean librarians and readers in all subject areas would agree that print volumes should be removed from open shelves! I will be discussing these issues below in the section headed 'Availability'.

At Oxford University the requirement to reduce periodical shelf space has been one of the main drivers in the discussion surrounding e-only. The STM libraries are currently reorganising their estate structure by consolidating smaller libraries into larger units and freeing up more shelf space for lending collections. In order to do this, journal print runs are being de-duplicated across Oxford, and remaining volumes will eventually be moved into closed stack areas. At the same time there have been concentrated efforts and financial investments during the last two years to buy as many back files as possible. Discussions at a workshop in December 2006 showed library staff in the STM libraries was generally very much in favour of a transition to e-only.

## 2 Costs

The annual rise of journal subscription prices is well-documented in literature and a thorn in the flesh of all serials librarians. I remember the early days of electronic journal publishing when there was hope that e-journals would be significantly cheaper than their print counterparts. Although there were many calculations which indicated that savings could be made by publishing online, this dream has not come true. On the contrary, publishers insist that huge investments are required in order to make journals available online. At the same time, expectations of readers and librarians rise, as quality and functionality of e-journals continuously improve. To cut the story short, the dream of cheaper journals has not proven true: most libraries continue to find that their serial budgets do not keep up with serial inflation.

In the United Kingdom, libraries are faced with the additional problem that 17.5% VAT is charged to all electronic publications, whilst print publications do not incur any VAT at all. This means that publishers would have to reduce e-journal prices significantly in order to compensate for the increased VAT rate. So far efforts of librarians at a national and European level to reduce VAT on electronic resources have not been successful.

Most librarians would – perhaps somewhat reluctantly – agree that large publisher bundle deals, so called 'big deals', offer good value for money. On the other hand these deals seriously limit the library's flexibility, and cancelling individual journal titles to reduce expenditure is no longer an option. The problems surrounding 'big deals' are not new to libraries, and affect hybrid collections in the same way as e-only deals. However, to me it seems that in an e-only environment the problems of the 'big deals' are exacerbated: The further libraries move away from print and towards e-only, the less tenable the publishers' current business models (which are based on previous print subscriptions) become.

Another problem arises in devolved library systems, such as Oxford, which are not entirely centrally funded. Whereas the print holdings are distributed across – and paid by – a large number of libraries, some of which have separate budgets, the new e-only deal will either have to be funded centrally or according to a complicated formula which has yet to be agreed.

Business models for 'big deals' and most other e-only deals are very complicated and difficult to explain. There are normally only a very limited number of specialist staff who understand the details of the deal and the full implications of print cancellations and/or a shift to e-only. This was confirmed by feedback from one of our staff workshops in Oxford: staff felt that the budget for electronic resources was complex and lacked transparency.

In addition to trying to understand the complexity of the deals themselves, librarians are faced with academics who think they are 'crazy' to pay penalty or other content fees (plus annual price increase and VAT) for print subscriptions which were cancelled years ago. This is particularly frustrating where these were duplicate subscriptions within the institution.

I think it is true to say that library managers and university administrators have – very reluctantly – come to the realisation that their serial budget problems will not be solved by moving to e-only. They therefore shift their focus towards potential savings in the area of journal storage and processing.

The question of how non-subscription savings can be achieved when a library moves to e-only was studied in depth by Roger C Schonfeld et al. [Schonfeld, 2004]. The authors calculated the life-cycle cost of print and electronic journals across eleven libraries in the United States. Not surprisingly, the results indicate that the electronic format brings a significant reduction in the non-subscription costs of periodicals across all libraries. What is interesting is that the costs and savings vary greatly depending on the size of the library. Potential savings are most pronounced at the smaller institutions; large libraries are possibly able to keep their processing costs for print periodicals low due to economies of scale. Considering the discrepancy in life-cycle costs, it appears impossible to put an exact figure against the savings that can be achieved by replacing print – or print and electronic – by electronic-only.

The research also shows that the greatest savings can be achieved if a *total transition* from print to electronic is achieved. In reality, though, in most libraries I have visited this transition is gradual. Schonfeld et al. point out that a gradual transition will – particularly in large libraries – lead to a decline in the economies of scale on the print format, and temporarily drive up the average cost per print title. Savings in the non-subscription area will consequently not be as immediate as one would wish for.

The conclusion seems to be that although moving to e-only will bring longer-term savings in the area of non-subscription costs, these savings can only be achieved if a significant part of the collection is switched to e-only. As long as the library operates in hybrid mode, even if only for part of the serial collection, the potential for savings is substantially reduced.

Oxford University is planning to switch to e-only for a significant number of STM titles from January 2008. Due to its nature as a legal deposit library Oxford will, however, continue to collect and archive print versions of all UK journals. This means that – for the foreseeable future – there will continue to be a large periodical processing department. But if the science and medical libraries no longer want to present these items on open shelves, they can be processed and stored centrally or in off-site storage, which would help maintain the economies of scale and reduce the cost.

### **3 Availability**

Improved availability is one of the most attractive features of electronic resources. Access is not confined to library opening hours, and readers have 24/7 access from their desktop; journal issues are never missing, at the bindery or misshelved.

Nonetheless, when talking to academics about moving to e-only, concern about availability comes high on the agenda. Typical reactions and questions are: 'What if the publisher goes bust?' – 'What if the server goes down?' – 'Who can guarantee that the files will still be readable in 50 or 100 years' time?' – 'What if the library cancels the subscription?'

Security of the archive, alternative access during downtime and post-cancellation access are important issues that need to be addressed before a decision is made to go e-only. Experience shows that students are also concerned about availability of computing facilities and affordable printing.

Although no individual library on its own can offer a solution to the worldwide challenge of digital preservation, measures can be put in place to help secure long-term access. The library can, for example, formulate a post-cancellation policy which sets out that it will only sign e-journal contracts with publishers who agree to grant post-cancellation access. The library can also join programmes such as LOCKSS or Portico which offer reliable and affordable solutions to e-journal content preservation and are regarded by many in the field as valid 'insurance policies'. It is also useful to enquire with the publisher what their long-term preservation policy is, and which national libraries or international programmes they are partnering with.

In the United Kingdom, there are also plans to build a National Research Reserve (NRR) which will act as a national safety net for journal holdings in order to maintain a limited but specified number of print copies for current use and/or posterity.

Oxford already has a post-cancellation policy, but is preparing a long-term access policy for e-journals, which will spell out what efforts are made to ensure security of long-term access and preservation of journal literature locally, on a national and international scale.

Discussions with academics and library staff in Oxford show that many believe that the best availability is guaranteed if a library holds both the print *and* online version of a journal. Many academics, particularly in Arts and Humanities, continue to appreciate the opportunity to browse and consult print collections. In such cases it is useful to point out the great advantages of online journals which cannot be replicated in print version (searching, alerting service, improved navigation, etc.). As already mentioned above, the status as legal deposit library means that Oxford will continue to collect and archive print copies of all UK journals. In the longer term, the question will arise whether the print issues of academic titles should be kept available for browsing in reading rooms, or whether they should be transferred directly to closed stack areas for archival purposes.

Interestingly, all academic libraries I have visited have chosen to maintain a very small number of print subscriptions of the most popular journals of the field; this may, for example, include *Nature* and *Science*. Having just a couple of journals available for browsing seems a sensible compromise. It would be interesting to know whether these libraries intend to archive these issues or plan to discard them after a couple of months.

(2,165 words)

## References

Roger C. Schonfeld et al.: *Library Periodicals Expenses: Comparison of Non-Subscription Costs of Print and Electronic Formats on a Life-Cycle Basis*. In: D-Lib Magazine, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Jan 2004). (Available online: <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/january04/schonfeld/01schonfeld.html>).