

GOING ONLINE-ONLY WITH JOURNAL CONTENT: AMERICAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY TAKES THE PLUNGE

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INTRODUCTION

The decision to move from print to online-only journals is fraught with uncertainty. While many aspects of the online environment have stabilized over the past few years, many unknowns remain, particularly about long-term preservation and access of content. Yet user demand, coupled with emerging technologies that facilitate the integration of online journal content with indexing databases, is driving the print journal toward obsolescence. Add to these factors the realities of library budgets and the cost of collecting in multiple formats, and the shift to online journals seems inevitable.

At American University Library we have decided that the time has come to embrace the inevitable, but we have been laying the groundwork for years, and it is this prep work that makes us ready to take the e-only plunge. This article provides a summary of the actions we have taken to prepare ourselves for this day, and describes the process we have followed throughout the first phase of the transition from print to online journal content.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

One of the first things we did in preparation for the shift to online-only journals had to do with our bound periodicals collection, and that was to create a mechanism to collect usage statistics on them. Because our periodicals collection is non-circulating, volumes had neither item records nor bar-codes. Without them we had no automated means of collecting usage data on volumes that “circulated” off the shelf. Not having this data was problematic enough for making collection management decisions about cancellation and off-site storage; clearly it would prove a hindrance in managing the collection through such a transitional time. In 1998 we began a project to bar-code our bound periodicals using part-time periodicals desk staff as our workforce. Five years later the project was completed and we began collecting data on all volumes that passed through the re-shelving process. This usage data has been an important factor in evaluating titles for online-only access.

Another early implementation that has served us well was the development of licensing guidelines for e-content. We wanted to insure from the start that our licenses would allow for the same uses that we enjoyed in the print environment. These uses include interlibrary loan, reserves, the full range of use allowable by “fair use” exemptions, and archiving rights. Having licensing guidelines in place early on means that we will not have to go back and negotiate those rights now.

One of the developments that has most greatly influenced the decision to make the transition from print to electronic journals has been the emergence of link-resolver products like SFX from ExLibris and Article Linker from Serials Solutions. (American University uses the SFX product from ExLibris.) Link-resolvers provide so much value added service to online collections by creating seamless connections between disparate e-content. And the databases that such services are built upon (e.g. the SFX KnowledgeBase) are themselves quickly becoming indispensable tools for managing e-journal collections.

Another relatively new tool that facilitates the shift to online-only content is LOCKSS (Lots of Copies Keeps Stuff Safe.) LOCKSS, an open source, peer-to-peer software package, is a relatively low cost and low maintenance system of capturing and storing digital journal content. Using a web crawler similar to a search engine, the LOCKSS software collects newly published content from select e-journals. (For more information on the LOCKSS program, see <http://lockss.stanford.edu>.) American University Library became a LOCKSS participant in mid 2005 in anticipation of the first transitional phase to online-only journals in 2006. While only a portion of the titles we are transitioning to online-only are currently LOCKSS enabled, having the system in place gives us something to build upon as we move forward.

Finally, many of us at the library have begun to sense a sea-change in faculty attitude toward online journals. While our students have expressed through a variety of surveys and focus groups their preferences for online content, many of our faculty have been reticent to make the switch. This seems to be changing, as more and more of our faculty have been advocating for an expansion of online journal access.

OUR STRATEGY

We decided to phase in our shift to online-only journal content over a two year period. Phase one would occur with our August 2005 renewal for the 2006 subscription term, with phase two to follow with the August 2006 renewal for the 2007 subscription term. We began in late 2004 by getting subscription lists from our subscription vendors (we use both Swets and EBSCO). These we sorted by publisher in order to identify with whom AUL held the most titles. Our goal was to identify the top five publishers for further evaluation as online-only providers. We evaluated these five for the stability of their publishing platforms, online backfile availability, and licensing terms that were in accordance with our licensing guidelines. In the end we identified three publishers for online-only access, with a total of 198 titles.

Our first step was to establish access to journals directly at the publisher sites. To date it had been our policy to access the online counterparts of our print journals via portals such as OCLC's Electronic Collections Online (ECO), Ingenta, and EBSCO's Electronic Journal Service (EJS). While we had been finding use of these intermediary portals increasingly problematic (users being sent to ECO only to be pushed through to Ingenta; EJS showing availability of content that wasn't always active at the publisher site, etc. we simply did not have sufficient staff to manage content at multiple publisher access points.

The addition of a new position in our Serials and Electronic Resources Unit resolved our staffing issues. We worked through the title lists by publisher, systematically activating online access for journals that accompanied our print collection. This process gave us an opportunity to ensure that we were getting online access to all of the titles from these three publishers to which we were entitled; where necessary we upgraded our subscription to include the print and online immediately in order to facilitate our transition process.

Once we had secured access to the appropriate set of journals at each publisher's websites, we had to determine our exact holdings so that we could input the information in our SFX KnowledgeBase. This was by far the most labor intensive part of the entire project. None of the publishers we worked with had as yet developed a mechanism for providing individual subscribers with a list of their licensed titles complete with accurate holdings data. It took many hours of staff time to review each journal to get an accurate holdings list. (This was true of two of the publishers in question. The third allowed subscriber access to all of the backfile content available at the site.) We then had to code our holdings in the format required by the SFX KnowledgeBase and upload them. American University Library uses a single record approach for multiple periodical formats, so holdings for the electronic versions of journals were added and/or updated to the catalog records to include links to the online versions. We also placed book dummies in the bound periodicals stacks marked with each journal's title and online location. These were critical steps in wide acceptance to making the transition to online-only journals, as a number of library faculty remained concerned that users would not be aware of nor be able to locate the online versions.

By early 2005 our SFX KnowledgeBase and our cataloging records accurately reflected the extent of our online holdings for these three publishers, and we were ready to begin the approval process for moving titles to online-only access. The process for review of journal projects is two-fold, with an internal review by library faculty followed by an external review by the teaching faculty at large.

During the internal review, seven titles were requested to be retained in both print and electronic formats. Two because the presence of graphical features and images made retention of the print format desirable; the other five because the print usage data showed continued high use of bound volumes.

By the conclusion of our external review process, only 7 faculty members had requested that print versions of journals be retained. Many of these stated the retention of both print and online as the ideal situation, but acknowledged that having the online-only version would be acceptable to them. Only two of the seven faculty members were adamant about print retention; these individuals accounted for 41 of the 58 discrete titles requested for retention. This posed a dilemma for us, for while we had expected numerous individuals to request retention of one or two titles, we had not anticipated that one or two individuals would request numerous titles for retention. Fortunately there was a great deal of overlap among all titles requested for retention. After much discussion, our Collection Management Team proposed that print be retained whenever two or more

individual faculty members had requested it. This compromise was accepted by the faculty members in question, and narrowed the retention list down to 11 titles.

The journal review process was one of the most informative parts of the project. Despite a very carefully crafted cover memo and preliminary message alerting faculty to the intent of the project, there were numerous questions regarding online backfiles, the fate of bound print volumes, and concern about embargoes such as those applied to some titles in aggregator databases like ProQuest Research Library and Ebsco's Academic Search Premier. Addressing these concerns up front would have ameliorated much of the faculty anxiety about making this transition; the next time we work through this process we will be sure to indicate the online holdings that will be immediately available to them, and clarify the fate of the print collection. We will also provide additional information on finding the journals in question via the catalog, and our E-journal finder. As it was, a number of faculty seemed at a loss at how to locate the online content...

CONCLUSION

Using a publisher by publisher approach to going online-only has worked well. It provides a discrete set of content to work with and an easy way to track and manage our process. Our SFX KnowledgeBase also organizes e-journal access by publisher, making it easy to match our subscription lists with our lists of activated titles.

This project garnered more feedback from faculty than any other on which we have consulted them. Many enthusiastically embraced the move to online-only journal content. Several approved the move with reservations, and only two expressed serious concern about the plan. Anyone undertaking such a project must be prepared to answer faculty concerns, and be ready to make decisions about the transition that may be unpopular with a small portion of the user group. We also learned that providing additional information about online holdings and our long-term plans for our existing print collections could have answered a number of concerns up front.

The transition to online access for the final 180 titles saved approximately \$2,500. This is something we did not track as closely as we might have – we plan to go back and do a detailed analysis of the subscription costs saved as well as the impact on our check-in, claiming, and bindery operations. We are currently in the process of identifying the next group of publishers to be evaluated for online-only access, and hope we can double the number of titles to go online-only with by the 2006 renewal.

Long-term access and preservation of online content remains a concern. American University Library acknowledges the risk involved, and has determined that the value-added benefits of online content outweigh the risk. We will continue to monitor the stability of our online content providers, activate LOCKSS for content whenever possible, and keep abreast of emerging preservation practices and standards so that we can adopt them accordingly.