

Meetings Reports

Impacts of changes in publisher provision of electronic journals - licensing and pricing issues

Report of a meeting organised by East Anglia Online User Group, Royal Society of Chemistry, Cambridge 11 May 2004

The opening presentation was given by Carolyn Alderson of Content Complete Ltd. In a wide-ranging talk she outlined the current state of the science, technology and medicine (STM) publishing world. Mergers and acquisitions, and the offering of bundled 'big deals' have been a recent feature of the industry and the smallest publishers risk being squeezed out as spending is concentrated with their larger rivals. As few as four publishers may now account for 50-70% of an institution's journals budget. Carolyn also outlined the role of Content Complete Ltd in negotiating digital content for JISC and other bodies and examined the economic viability of the open-access model.

The following two speakers, Bridget Taxy of Elsevier and Mike Hannant of the Royal Society of Medicine, addressed the issues involved from the perspectives of a large commercial publisher and a not-for-profit publisher respectively. With particular reference to the Elsevier product ScienceDirect, Bridget emphasised the benefits of large bundled deals in terms of the huge quantities of information they make available, with facilities for searching and linking both within the publisher's own portfolio and to other content. Archival security is also a priority. She described the STM journals market as highly competitive, and growing, authors typically having a wide choice of journals to submit to. Finally she outlined the pricing structure of ScienceDirect, arguing that Open Access publishing was by no means 'free' and that the Elsevier policies on pricing and copyright for authors is more generous than might be thought.

Mike Hannant then explained the publishing role of the RSC as a not-for-profit body. Unlike Elsevier, the RSC has decided not to offer its journals as a 'big bundle' but allows customers to choose the titles they license. They do have over 50 consortium/multi-site agreements. Bridget Taxy had presented the benefits of being able to present non-text digital information such as audio or video files, and Mike emphasised the challenges involved in digitising non-standard print formats when making archival material available online, formats such as loose-leaf pull-outs, small fonts, and, in one memorable example, spinning card discs! The difficulty of developing pricing models not based on print subscriptions and the complexities of negotiating

licences in the absence of a model universally accepted by both publishers and customers were also emphasised. Nonetheless print subscriptions would continue to be cancelled in favour of online-only access.

After lunch, Catriona MacCallum presented the economics of traditional STM publishing as fundamentally problematic, with journals enjoying a monopolistic position and prices outstripping libraries' journals budgets. She advocated the Open Access model whereby authors retain copyright and their work is made freely available on the internet via a public online database. As well as extending access, this opens up the possibility to develop new tools for full-text searching and data-mining.

Nick Lewis of the UEA then examined whether or not the time is now ripe for academic libraries to move to electronic-only. He asked whether there are any major disadvantages to doing so and whether there would be any cost savings to be made. The subscription savings, based on two services with adequate archival arrangements, JSTOR and Sciencedirect, are wiped out by the VAT levied on electronic content, but there are considerable economies to be made in terms of administration costs and storage space. In most cases the lack of adequate archival arrangements, guaranteeing both preservation of content and access to it, is serious enough to be ranked as a 'showstopper' in terms of moving to e-only. There is, as yet, no agreement as to where responsibility should lie for archiving e-journals. Nick advocated proceeding gradually, withdrawing print where archiving is satisfactory and creating a culture of e-only so as to be in a position to take full advantage of it when the outstanding problems are resolved.

The final talk was given by Peter Morgan, director of the DSpace@Cambridge project, who addressed the issues involved in self-archiving and the establishment and operation of institutional repositories. Such repositories, which aim to manage and disseminate digitised material produced by institutions, are technically feasible and most publishers do permit self-archiving in some form but researchers need to be persuaded that the benefits to themselves and their institutions, which include improved dissemination of their work and archival security, outweigh the workload and the perceived risk of losing the benefits of traditional publishing, such as the quality control of peer-review and the loss of 'impact factor' status.

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