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On The Street

Are You Still Keeping Paper Titles Even If You Have Electronic Access?

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This month's library survey concerned electronic access to titles and the decisions to retain/delete print when both versions are available.

These questions were posed to librarians selected at random —

1. How does your collection development policy address whether the library purchases print or electronic versions of your collection?

2. Compared to last year's collection budget, are you purchasing more electronic titles than last year?

3. What are the considerations in deciding whether you eliminate print when the electronic version is available, and ... what about archiving?

4. Is the electronic version able to give you all the information available in the print version?

Those who participated in this survey included:

Bill Wilson, Gettysburg College

Peter Stevens,

University of Washington

Keith Stetson, Fairfield University

Elsie Pritchard,

Morehead State University

Judith Niles, University of Louisville

Noelene Martin, Penn State University

Kerry Keck, Rice University

Thomas Izbicki,

Johns Hopkins University

Michelle Harmon,

Charleston County Library

Anthony Ferguson,

Columbia University

Craig Elam, University of North Texas

Claudine Daniel,

Emory and Henry College

Judith Culbertson,

Shippensburg University

Jill Carraway, Wake Forest University

Eastern Connecticut State University

and, anonymously:

"A medium-sized comprehensive state-supported university"

"A famous federal institution"

The first question revealed almost all institutions have not addressed this issue except in general terms. This situation was reflected in the following responses: "We are currently revising our collection development policies"; "Our current policy does not address this at all"; "The policy hasn't been revised since the early 90's"; and "Our user surveys and our perceptions of library user-needs emphasize more electronic versions." Ninety percent of the answers ran along these lines.

In answer to the second question, ninety-five percent of the librarians reported purchases of the electronic form were above last year's budgets. The other five percent said budgets remained the same as last year, and no one reported electronic budgets were below last year's levels.

When it came to making a decision about actually eliminating the print version because of the electronic acquisition, very few librarians said they dropped print. Eighty percent of those surveyed felt print titles should be eliminated only after very extensive analysis. Influencing this decision were: faculty comments; whether other members of the library consortium were retaining a print copy of the title; the size of the user group interested in the print version; a comparison of the print/electronic version's cost; and evaluation of the vendor of the electronic title. When this latter comment was made, some librarians expressed fear the vendor may not be in business in the future and were concerned about continuity of access.

The second part of this question involved concern over archiving of the collection. Several respondents express the desire for publishers to maintain archives of their electronic works, and in one instance a librarian said no purchase would be made if the publisher did not guarantee such an archive. In order to provide users access to past issues JSTOR subscriptions provided that capability for perhaps ten percent of the institutions surveyed.

The survey participants split about 50/50 when it came to evaluating the question of whether the electronic version gave added value/more information than the print. All agreed the institution's staff, faculty, and student population enjoyed multiple access points for the electronic title and this was a big plus. Typical answers in evaluating both print and electronic titles were: "It depends," "Not always," and "Yes, and No."

In summary, the key findings from the survey include:

1. Institutions have to publicize purchasing policies (regarding print/electronic) so that all members of the institution know what it is.


2. Electronic purchases will continue upward and will account for a greater share of acquisition and collection development budgets.

3. Greater access to titles is gained campus-wide when the electronic version is available.

4. Library consortia will become more important state-wide, for public institutions, and regionally, for private institutions.

5. Archiving through systems like JSTOR, which guarantees access to titles published five years ago, will become more important.

6. Librarians feel not all technological issues are being addressed regarding electronic use but no one wants to be left behind in this information environment.

7. Not much print is being eliminated and, where costs require cancellations, libraries are utilizing document delivery to replace subscriptions. 

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