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Drinking From the Firehose — The “Poof Effect:” The Impact of E-Journals Bought and Sold

by **Eleanor I. Cook** (Appalachian State University, Boone, NC)
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Back when I was a serials cataloger, I used to get agitated over silly serial title changes. I always enjoyed the “Worst Serial Title Change of the Year” awards, and even helped draft a brochure targeted to publishers to address the issue. You can still find this pamphlet, “What’s in a Name?” on the **ALAALCTS** Website: <http://www.ala.org/ala/alctscontent/alctspubsbucket/webpublications/alctsserials/whatsinanamepres/whatsname.htm>.

(I hear there is a move afoot to update this — if so, I heartily support the effort!)

Nowadays, I am more concerned about access issues with electronic journals. Title changes are still an annoyance, to be sure, but this pales in comparison to the constant change of who actually owns a journal. Publishers are trading journals like baseball cards! Maybe they always did and librarians did not notice as much; after all, when we were managing print journals, the publisher might change, but as long as the title and numbering stayed the same, and the subscription agent made sure we got our issues, it really didn’t matter most of the time.

This is not true anymore. When Publisher A sells Journal X to Publisher B, and we access this journal online, there is a huge impact. And I really don’t think publishers, until perhaps recently, have had a clue how this affected their library customers. The reason I say this is because the first time it happened to my library, it took me 6 MONTHS to regain access. (And of course, no one offered to give us a credit for the time access was lost). Since this first ugly incident, things have gotten better (I’ve learned to yell nicer but faster and louder), but the number of times it happens seems to be increasing. I have no way of knowing if these title trades are happening more often; perhaps it just seems so since I am more aware of them.

I say the impact is huge — how is that, you ask? If you manage online journals, I don’t have to tell you. But if you are reading this and wondering what it’s all about, here it is:

Online titles have distinct address links (known as the URL = Uniform Resource Locator). If Publisher A sells to Publisher B, that URL is going to change. When will it change? Nobody knows — they don’t usually tell us. On the library’s end, that URL has to be changed in the library’s catalog, possibly in an A-Z list (if such a list is maintained) and the Proxy server link (if there is one) might also need correcting or updating. Besides URL links, the subscription record must be augmented in numerous ways, and if there is a license for the new publisher (assuming it’s not already on file) that also has to be vetted, signed and filed. So about the



only thing you don’t have to change with an online title is the binding pattern!

The communication about these changes is uneven at best. Sometimes we get an email, sometimes there is some kind of newsletter we’re supposed to look at (which I’m not going to “go” to — I need this kind of updating service pushed to me if I am ever to keep track of such things) and sometimes the subscription agent is letting us know. It’s the latter that we really depend on, and as more and more of our print subscriptions get converted to online only (through the agent) hopefully the easier this will get.

One of the big problems is that publishers are living in their own little universes, reinventing their wheels over and over again. They all want their own platforms, their own Website design, etc. Now what if we did cataloging like that? That’s why the MARC record was created and that is why most of us use **OCLC!** I don’t know where standards for ejournal platforms will take us, but we cannot keep maintaining 60 gazillion different ways to get to ejournals.

We are trying to keep the platforms our library uses to a minimum, but it ain’t easy. We use our subscription agent’s system, several large and/or ahead-of-the-curve publisher platforms, a couple of document delivery company platforms and then dozens and dozens of unique, individual publisher’s sites in order to access the journals. And we use and love **JSTOR** and **Project Muse**, initiatives that were developed and inspired by librarians and that we often hold up to publishers as something to admire and imitate.

Here’s the problem: Even **JSTOR** and **Project Muse**, as much as we like them, are having struggles. As their publisher constituents become more savvy and confident in the online realm, the more likely they might be to break away and decide to do their own thing. Witness the **Duke University Press** decision to move 16 core titles off **Project Muse**. This decision, which came right at the fall renewal period, might be good for **Duke**, but it has been a massive headache for libraries. And the timing was terrible. At this writing, some librarians are still not aware of the impact, (in spite of the press releases and letters they should have received) and some won’t realize it until the access disappears at the end of 2004.

Whenever a publisher either sells a title or changes the access platform, libraries have to stop and change lots of things. I call this the “Poof Effect” since once the change is made (often with little or late notice) the access goes “poof.” That is, it disappears suddenly and un-

IMPORTANT CHANGES

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til someone notices, there is no access. It can go on for months if no one catches it. This is not so dissimilar from “claiming” in the print world, but it can happen a lot faster.

One thing about URLs: they must be perfect or they don’t work. Period. This is not about picky catalogers agonizing over whether there is a comma in the right place, or fussing over the wording of a note. Uh, uh, this is critical. That URL better be right or no one has access. I pointed this out to my library administrators when I was arguing for the creation of a staff position to help with ejournal maintenance. I think this fact hits home.

Large and/or forward-thinking libraries may already have a bevy of staff working on these projects. Some libraries are ahead of the curve and are putting most of their eggs in the online basket. The **University of Nevada-Reno** and **Cornell University** (among others) come to mind. For 2004, we are switching over 250 active subscriptions to online only and the end is nowhere in sight.

At our library, I do most of this maintenance with some help from other staff who are just getting their feet wet in the ejournal pond. I can’t get enough help though, and like many other libraries, we are in the process of retraining and reorganizing the work in order to accommodate these changes.

So — my plea to publishers: Stop trying to recreate the wheel. Support standards. Support subscription agent systems — we want to

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Back Talk — Closed to Open

Column Editor: **Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson** (Library Director, University of Hong Kong; Phone: 852 2859 2200; Fax: 852 2858 9420) <ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk>



I am contemplating opposing “openness.” In the past I liked people who were open-minded, who opened up, who favored open-shop workplaces, who liked the open road, who like to watch the **US Open** on rainy days, and I like stores with signs that say “open” when I go there. But with the advent of the open access, open source and open archives movements, I think the word open is over-used at best and really means closed to lots of things at worst.

“Open Source,” according to THE source of all knowledge [the Web] means “a method and philosophy for software licensing and distribution designed to encourage use and improvement of software written by volunteers by ensuring that anyone can copy the source code and modify it freely.”¹ This sounds great, but in the context of universities and their libraries, it now relates to a millennial view of life in which universities which normally strive to kill each other in physical, bureaucratic, and intellectual sports contests, will somehow agree to pool huge sums of money to develop systems of mutual benefit. Moreover, they will then freely give these programs to the other institutions which were too cheap to pitch in to help in the first place. Open source requires them not to purchase a commercially produced e-portfolio, learning platform, e-resource repository, registration system that works, more or less, but instead work together to develop something that meets all their needs.

Recently, two good articles were published about open source. The first, entitled “Open Source 2007” by **Brad Wheeler** in the July/August issue of *Educause Review* sketches two possible scenarios for the future.² The second, “5 Challenges for Open Source” by **Jeffrey Young** in the September 24 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, notes that for the movement to be a success there must be

community, an agreement on how open is open, a commitment of funds up to 75 to 80 percent of the off the shelf price, a willingness to work with the commercial sector, and a willingness to dump what was at least working in favor of something that might work better.³ I would like to be optimistic that open source will be a success, but my experience as a largely ignored preacher of cooperative collection development doesn’t give me much hope. While at **Columbia**, I was overjoyed when, after more than 170 years, **NYU** and **Columbia** agreed to allow each others students to freely enter each others libraries (stay tuned, mutual checkout privileges may come next). In Hong Kong, six out of eight university libraries recently agreed to relax access restrictions on undergraduates. So, while I would like to believe that there will be a rush for institutions to work together, I won’t hold my breath much longer than 60 seconds or so.

“Open Access” is another wonderful idea. It begins with the suggestion that authors and other copyright holders will agree to share with the world access to their work by depositing an electronic copy on a publicly accessible Website forever.⁴ Since these idealists recognize that commercial publishers — albeit library-friendly ones — won’t survive unless someone pays their bills, open access also means that the authors or their sponsors must pay fees before their research can be published and so libraries won’t have to pay so much. This piece of genius requires one to ignore the possibility that once research universities finish paying the fees to these welfare publishers, their pockets may be empty. It also assumes that quality, not the availability of the needed subsidies, will dictate what gets published.

Another member of the current generation of opens is the “Open Archive” movement. An open archive is one “for which metadata is pub-

licly available (i.e., ‘exposed’) to researchers via a service provider. The ‘open’ part of this technical term refers to the architectural aspect of the open archives idea — the definition and promotion of machine interfaces which facilitate the availability of content from a variety of providers.”⁵ This relative of open access is another wonderful idea and one I have championed myself. The only problem is it requires people to freely deposit their intellectual output in the electronic input box. This does not, unfortunately, seem to automatically happen. The “build it and they will come” theology doesn’t seem to apply here too well. Perhaps, like the cathedrals of Europe that are under eternal construction waiting for funds to appear, this may be a work of centuries, not weeks or months. The open archive movement assumes a culture change. Researchers who want to share their findings have to worry about securing funding. Well-received articles in internationally recognized journals can be parlayed for needed grant funding, released time, or lower teaching loads. What are the rewards for depositing articles in open archives?

An examination of the open source, open access, and open archive movements causes one to question the meaning of the word “open.” Open is supposed to mean “affording unobstructed entrance and exit; not shut or closed.”⁶ But in these cases what is it that one has access to because the gate is open? If open source means universities are free to develop mutually beneficial software, but the costs rival those of commercial products, can that mean that too much time is spent on getting ready to do a good thing instead of doing the good thing? Twenty years ago libraries were involved in the community development of integrated library systems. We were supposed to be buying turnkey systems but we all made so many conflicting demands upon the commercial developers that

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use them. And if you must buy and sell titles like baseball cards, for goodness sake, give us a heads up. Give us a grace period like we used to get in the old days of print journals. And I hope the **Duke UP / Project Muse** situation is an exception and not a trend. Otherwise, we suffer a betrayal at the hands of those who promised us the online world. We all have enough to worry about with shrinking budgets, terrorists threatening the end of the world as we know it, profound obesity from eating too much fast food, global warming, and everything being made in China. By the time this comes to print, the election will be over, so I won’t even go there. 🍷

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