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Purchasing E-Books from Life and Physical Science Society Publishers: Trends and Considerations

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Abstract

This study evaluates e-book publishing by professional life and physical science societies. In order to be good stewards of their resources, collection managers should always be aware of digital rights management (DRM) restrictions and access issues when contemplating an e-book purchase. This can be difficult due to the wide variety of publishing models employed by society e-book publishers. In this study the authors examine various life and physical science societies that publish e-books, including factors such as DRM and access conditions, and purchasing options. The results provide information for collection managers to consider when purchasing e-books from society publishers, as well as allows them to advise patrons when access to e-books may be limited to society members.

Introduction

Professional societies in the sciences provide important opportunities for members and major contributors in the field to share information. These societies provide valuable opportunities for professional development, collaboration, and the creation or influence of scientific legislation and policy. The information is frequently produced in the form of conference presentations and so-called “grey literature,” peer-reviewed journals, and sometimes books, which have historically been offered in print. Some societies publish books themselves in-house, and others do so through commercial publishers. While some of these organizations have begun offering e-books, their output varies significantly from a substantial collection to a single title. The variation creates many differences in the functionality of the books, for example a book with printing restrictions that may be read on a society’s website or a book that can be downloaded and printed. For this reason, collection managers should always carefully investigate digital rights management restrictions and access issues when contemplating an e-book purchase. In this study we examine various life and physical science societies that publish e-books, revealing factors such as DRM and access conditions, and options for purchasing.

Literature Review

As primarily non-profit organizations, professional societies traditionally have spread the costs of publishing to members via dues and merchandise, and in some cases via institutional subscriptions. However, the peer review process and editing that are so important to scholarly research require a robust and sustainable publishing system, which some societies find easier to achieve by partnering with commercial publishers (Yess, 2004). Much of the scholarly literature concerning society publishing looks specifically at journals. In 2005, a study of the journal publishing practices of members of the Council of Academic Societies found that almost half of the journals were published in conjunction with a commercial publisher (Byrd, Bader, & Mazzaschi, 2005). This suggests that the cost of publishing is one that some societies are not able to fully absorb and sustain on their own.

The 2015 STM Report (Science, Technology, and Medicine) relayed information from Outsell, Inc. that the STM e-book market is growing much faster than the print book market and STM market as a whole (Ware & Mabe, 2015). It is not clear that all society publishers are able to mirror this trend. Although results from studies determining

actual usage of e-books vary quite a bit, they have shown that the more e-books a library acquires, the more they are used (Lamothe, 2013). There is also some indication that STEM fields show more preference for e-books than other fields (Frame, 2014; Marshall, 2014). This can make it a challenge for librarians as they try to plan for future collections.

A Taylor and Francis survey conducted last year in conjunction with the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP) found that the most revenue that society respondents gained from publishing was 5–25% (Frass, Gardner, & McCulloch, 2014). The study also indicated that 28–47% of respondents were considering publishing new journals or open access journals for revenue. Thirty percent of respondents felt that society publications are very important in attracting new members. Furthermore, the majority of respondents found that high quality online publishing and “partnering” to improve the journals were most important in terms of journal publishing. The largest percentage of respondents indicated that a journal publisher brought greater discoverability and better financial return to their society publications. Only 10% were concerned with combined book and journal publishing options. This concentration on journal output may be related to the fact that journals remain the primary way scientists convey significant research.

The STM report points to a number of similarities between the journal and e-book markets. For example, journals are often packaged into bundles for libraries and library consortia, and the e-book market is trending toward this model as well (Ware & Mabe, 2015). There is one notable difference between the journal and e-book markets, however—namely that end users are more likely to purchase e-books than journals, effectively cutting out the library as middleman. This may have implications for society publishers concerned with costs and revenue.

In addition to the murky nature of e-book publishing by societies, the usability of resources is an ever present concern. DRM and usage restrictions create a significant barrier for users, especially in institutional settings. Previous studies have shown that publishers are responding to

these usage concerns, and purchasing from a publisher rather than an aggregator reduces DRM restrictions and access issues (Kerby & Trei, 2015). Discoverability, usability, and dissemination of member-contributed content, as well as facilitating collaboration, are important roles filled by societies. Transitioning publishing models for online journals to books produced by a society would face many of the same financial constraints and technical challenges. This research begins to uncover some of the issues faced by society publishers and what that means for usage and access of the resources.

Methods

To compile the list of society publishers, the authors consulted the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP, <http://www.alpsp.org/Ebusiness/AboutAlpsp/ListofMembers.aspx>) and the Society for Scholarly Publishing (SSP, <http://www.sspnet.org/about-us/organizational-members/>) member lists. They also referred to the list of societies in the University of Illinois online journals and databases list at <http://sfx.carli.illinois.edu/sfxui/az>, and searched in the following subject areas for the terms “society” or “association”:

- Agriculture sciences
- Chemistry
- Environmental sciences
- Health sciences
- Life sciences
- Physics

Further entries were added based on the authors’ professional experience and recommendations from other subject specialist librarians. The list was compiled in alphabetical order and then each society’s website was searched to determine whether the society published e-books. If so, then findings were recorded for each of the following categories:

- Published by society or external publisher
- Purchase options
- DRM restrictions

- Usage allowance
- MARC record availability

When the information was not readily available on the website, the authors contacted the society to inquire about the missing information. Eighteen societies were contacted, and responses were received from 11.

Results

There were 149 life and physical science societies identified via the methods described above. Of

these, only 34 produce any kind of e-book content. One society, the American Society of Limnology and Oceanography, produces one e-book in PDF format for free download from the site, whereas all other societies offer e-books for purchase to either individuals or institutions. The authors were unable to obtain information about institutional purchasing from four of the publishers: the American Heart Association, the American Medical Association, the American Phytopathological Society, and the Australian Entomological Society. Of the remaining 29

Society Publisher	Individual Purchase/Subscription Available	Institutional Purchase/Subscription Available	Marc Records Available
American Society of Agricultural and Biological Engineers	Yes	Yes	No
Acoustical Society of America	Yes	No	No
American Academy of Pain Medication	Yes	Yes	Yes
American Ceramic Society	Yes	Yes	Yes
American Chemical Society	Yes	Yes	Yes
American Geophysical Union	Yes	Yes	Yes
American Geriatrics Society	Yes	Yes	No
American Heart Association	Yes	Unknown	Unknown
American Medical Association	Yes	Unknown	Unknown
American Meteorological Society	Yes	Yes	Yes
American Oil Chemists' Society	Yes	Yes	Yes
American Physiological Society	Yes	Yes	Yes
American Phytopathological Society	Yes	Unknown	Unknown
American Society for Microbiology	Yes	Yes	Yes
American Society of Agronomy	Yes	Yes	Yes
American Society of Health-System Pharmacists	Yes	Yes	Yes
American Society of Limnology and Oceanography	Free	Free	No
Australian Entomological Society	Yes	Unknown	Unknown
Biochemical Society	No	Yes	Unknown
Crop Science Society of America	Yes	Yes	Yes
Endocrine Society	No	Some Titles	Yes
Entomological Society of America	Yes	No	No
European Respiratory Society	Yes	Yes	Unknown
Faraday Society	Yes	Yes	Yes
Geological Society of America	Yes	Yes	No
Institute of Physics	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nutrition Society	Yes	Yes	Yes
Royal Astronomical Society	Yes	Yes	Yes
Royal Astronomical Society of Canada	Yes	No	No
Royal Society of Chemistry	Yes	Yes	Yes
Society of Dairy Technology	Yes	Yes	Yes
Soil Science Society of America	Yes	Yes	Yes
Water Environment Federation	Yes	No	No
World Wildlife Federation	Yes	Some Titles	Some Titles

Table 1. Purchasing options and MARC record availability.

Society Publisher	DRM Restrictions	Additional Terms
America Academy of Pain Medication	None	
American Ceramic Society	None	
American Chemical Society	None	"DRM is governed by existing ACS License"
American Geophysical Union	None	
American Geriatrics Society	None	
American Meteorological Society	Restricted	
American Oil Chemists' Society	Restricted	
American Physiological Society	None	
American Society for Microbiology	None	
American Society of Agricultural and Biological Engineers	None	
American Society of Agronomy	None	
American Society of Health-System Pharmacists	Restricted	May only print page in use.
Biochemical Society	Restricted	Cannot download entire book.
Crop Science Society of America	None	
Endocrine Society	Varied	Aggregators have DRM restrictions. Books published by Wiley have no restrictions.
European Respiratory Society	Unknown	
Faraday Society	None	
Geological Society of America	None	
Institute of Physics	None	
Nutrition Society	Restricted	
Royal Astronomical Society	None	
Royal Society of Chemistry	None	
Society of Dairy Technology	Restricted	
Soil Science Society of America	None	
World Wildlife Federation	Varied	Springer published volumes have no DRM, others do.

Table 2. DRM terms and conditions for institutional purchases.

publishers, 25 offer purchasing options for institutions for at least some of their titles (Table 1). These titles are offered in various ways: published by a for-profit publisher such as Springer or Wiley, published on a platform native to the society itself, or offered through aggregators such as EBSCO or ebrary.

The availability of these e-books from any society varied widely from a single PDF title hosted on the society's website to an entire collection and robust member interface. Most publishers posted DRM and usage allowance on their website or have provided information to the authors.

Although the European Respiratory Society has not responded, of the other 24 societies, 71% provide unlimited concurrent usage of the titles and 67% have no DRM restrictions (Tables 2 and 3). Usage and DRM restrictions are frequently different for individual users—most of the time more restricted. Although the Biochemical Society and European Respiratory Society have not responded regarding the availability of MARC records, of the other 23 societies with institutionally available titles, 87% did provide records, either themselves or through the company providing their content (Table 1).

Society Publisher	Usage Options	Additional Terms
American Society of Agricultural and Biological Engineers	Unlimited Concurrent	
America Academy of Pain Medication	Unlimited Concurrent	
American Ceramic Society	Unlimited Concurrent	
American Chemical Society	Unlimited Concurrent	Monitor for excessive downloads
American Geophysical Union	Unlimited Concurrent	
American Geriatrics Society	Unlimited Use, Limited Concurrence	5-25 concurrent users based on package.
American Meteorological Society	Varied	Purchased through aggregator.
American Oil Chemists' Society	Varied	Purchased through aggregator.
American Physiological Society	Unlimited Concurrent	
American Society for Microbiology	Unlimited Concurrent	
American Society of Agronomy	Unlimited Concurrent	
American Society of Health-System Pharmacists	Varied	Subscriptions available based on concurrent user or unlimited concurrent.
Biochemical Society	Unlimited Concurrent	
Crop Science Society of America	Unlimited Concurrent	
Endocrine Society	Varied	Purchased through aggregator.
European Respiratory Society	Unknown	
Faraday Society	Unlimited Concurrent	Limit is course pack downloads.
Geological Society of America	Unlimited Concurrent	
Institute of Physics	Unlimited Concurrent	
Nutrition Society	Varied	Purchased through aggregator.
Royal Astronomical Society	Unlimited Concurrent	
Royal Society of Chemistry	Unlimited Concurrent	Limit is course pack downloads.
Society of Dairy Technology	Unlimited Concurrent	
Soil Science Societ of America	Unlimited Concurrent	
World Wildlife Federation	Varied	Purchased through various providers.

Table 3. Usage allowance for institutional purchases.

Implications

The results of this study suggest that no single e-book publishing model is working for the majority of society publishers. Some have chosen to use a more traditional model for book publishing by offering e-book titles individually. Others are treating their e-book content similar to their journals, even to the point of bundling all e-content together into packages available by subscription or purchase for institutions.

The vast majority of societies provide e-book content to individuals. Occasionally, this is a

benefit of membership in the society, but many times membership only provides a discount on e-book pricing. For example, in this study only the American Physiological Society and European Respiratory Society offer free e-books or access to full-text for members. Others provide a discount of some sort, such as the American Society of Agricultural and Biological Engineers and the Royal Society of Chemistry, both of which give download credits with membership. Four societies in this analysis restrict e-book content to individuals. One, the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada, provides its one e-book to members

only when contacted directly. Rarely do societies exclusively offer content to institutions, but it does happen. The Biochemical Society formerly offered its *Biochemical Society Symposia* in e-book format to institutions subscribing to its e-content platform; now this content appears to have been wrapped into an e-journal produced by the society. Additionally, the American Chemical Society only sells the print versions of monographs to individuals. As over 80% of societies studied offer e-books in some way to institutions, most recognize the likelihood of their use by researchers in academia. Unfortunately, the manner in which these e-books are available varies widely, creating inconsistencies for users accessing the content and for those making purchasing decisions.

As with e-books purchased from any vendor, libraries are primarily concerned with patron needs. Consequently, DRM and access restrictions severely hamper the value of an e-resource. Across the board it was clear that DRM and usage restrictions were more stringent for individual members than for institutions. The majority of the societies make their e-book content available to institutions with little DRM or usage restrictions. As is true with the e-book market as a whole, society e-book content is much more likely to be free of restrictions if purchased from the publisher itself, rather than through an aggregator. Thirteen of the societies publish their content on a native platform. In these cases, the platform may have customizable features. For example, individuals may create a personal login with the American Society of Microbiology and the American Chemical Society, through an institutional subscription, and “favorite” titles and chapters, or save searches for easy content access. Since the majority of publishers provide MARC records for institutions, it allows easy addition to library catalogs, increasing findability for the user and requiring fewer resources from the subscribing institutions.

It can be challenging for a collection manager to predict if and where an e-book from a society publisher might be available, particularly with titles from societies with less publishing output. The findings of this study will assist collection managers in locating this content and making purchase decisions. The platform structure, number of titles, usage restrictions, and cost must be balanced with needs and priorities of the institution. In particular, e-books with DRM and access restrictions that limit usage and download of content create barriers for end users that a print volume might alleviate. To make their e-books more attractive to libraries, society publishers need to offer their content without DRM restrictions and with unfettered usage options to increase the value for institutions and use of their materials.

Conclusion

Though relatively few life and physical science professional societies publish e-books, the majority of those do make their e-book content available to institutions. They also generally provide unfettered access to this content. Society publishers do produce less e-book content than journals, but many still choose to share research and conference proceedings in this way. The preference for electronic journal content by scientific societies is unsurprising, as the process of peer review is stronger and more prevalent in these publications. However, whether they see e-books as a way to increase revenue for the society, or as an important contribution to scholarly communication from a trusted source, some scientific societies are clearly following the trend of increased e-book publishing. Future research could include evaluating usage of society publications and investigation into member perception of e-book content produced by these societies.

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