

Information May Become Freely Available, But Information Is Not Free

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In an opinion piece published in the May 2005 issue of *American Libraries*, Patricia Wand, a librarian at American University in Washington, D.C., pointed out that “today, when the Web gives society the illusion that all information is available to everyone, more and more of the latest and most highly vetted research findings are locked up in expensive, proprietary databases, accessible by fewer and fewer individuals.”¹

We have found this to be increasingly true for the TSTC Waco Library. Although the TSTC Waco Library is primarily for the students and employees of Texas State Technical College Waco, the general public has been allowed to use the materials if they use them within the library. While in the past those not associated with TSTC Waco could often find the information they needed by accessing journals within our library in the print format, today many of our print periodicals are being cancelled and replaced by an electronic version.

These electronic journals are accessed through databases that the library purchases as a subscription. We also must purchase subscriptions with the print journals; however, unlike the print version that anyone may read if they so desire, the electronic version of the journal is restricted to authorized individuals affiliated with the Waco campus, in distance learning, the Fort Bend Technical Center or the Palacios Center. Therefore, journals that the general public may have been able to use in the past to fulfill their information needs may no longer be accessible if the library has cancelled that particular journal in the print format to subscribe to it in electronic format.

Users of the databases have free access but the TSTC Waco Library must pay the subscription cost, which, at this time, is partially subsidized by the Texas State Library under the TexShare program. With the subsidy, we have found that our money goes further with electronic journal subscriptions than with individual print subscriptions.

As the costs for the print versions increased, we decided it was more fiscally responsible to cancel the print version when the same journal was available through the EBSCOhost subscription.

One requirement in determining whether to provide a journal in only the electronic version is that the articles must be in the PDF full-text format, which is essential for showing the page numbers and any graphs, pictures or illustrations, rather

than the HTML full-text format, which does not provide the page numbers, graphs, pictures or illustrations. Since we began subscribing to EBSCOhost three years ago, more of the journals have been converted from the HTML format to the PDF format. However, since some of the articles continue to be formatted in HTML, instructors may need to revise requirements that the exact page be cited for a quote from an article; and, instead, they may need to be willing to accept a footnote which provides the range of pages of the article but does not specify the exact page on which the quote may be found.

“ . . . databases are known to change titles from one subscription period to another—and have done so. ”

Criteria for Exclusion From Print Collection

Additional criteria that the Library uses to determine whether a print version will be kept or cancelled in favor of the electronic version includes:

- Student and faculty research needs;
- Availability of electronic version (the print version is kept if the journal is not available in an electronic format);
- Costs of subscription; and
- Statistics showing the print journal is heavily used, even if we also have the electronic format available.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Electronic Format

Although an advantage of the electronic format is that some databases permit off-campus access to individuals, a disadvantage to the electronic format is that the library has no control over which journals are kept in or removed from the databases. Although there will be stability through the annual subscription period, the databases have been known to change titles from one subscription period to another.

EBSCOhost, while allowing off-campus access without an additional fee, does change which titles are available from one subscription year to another. For example, for 2004/2005 EBSCOhost offered TexShare members 23 different databases but only offered 17 different databases in 2005/2006. And within those databases some of the journal titles have been dropped.

Also, some databases do not allow off-campus access unless an additional fee, usually costly, is paid. Our other online subscriptions – WestLaw, OCLC First Search, and Wilson Web – are examples. Those who are authorized to use the databases may use these only on campus.

Another advantage of subscribing to the electronic journals over the print version is the current lower cost. The Texas State Library subsidizes most of the subscription expense and EBSCOhost provides a group rate since libraries across the state join together as a consortium to purchase subscriptions to the electronic database; however, this advantage would disappear if the Texas State Library decided to end its subsidy.

The advantage of lower costs would also end should EBSCOhost decide to increase its rates to compensate for the loss of revenue from cancelled print subscriptions. The TSTC Waco Library saved \$16,907 from canceling print journals to subscribe to EBSCOhost at a cost to the library of \$2,500, for a net savings of \$14,407 to the college. Through conversations with other directors in Texas, the Library Director has found that several of the libraries are also canceling print subscriptions for the electronic version.

“Still, the cost of journals, whether in print or electronic format, is expensive enough to shut out some researchers . . .”

In some cases, subscribing to the electronic version of a journal is the only way the library can afford to obtain the journal because the print version is so expensive. For example, a print subscription to *International Journal of Nanoscience* is \$746 for the six issues each year and a price increase to \$983 for six issues was recently announced, making the new cost \$163.84 per issue. We are able to receive the journal through the EBSCOhost database, which provides access to several hundred journal titles for the cost of only a few thousand dollars. Even though there is a six- to 12-month delay before we receive the electronic version of the most recent issue of some of the more expensive journals, we believe the delay is acceptable for the cost savings.

Origin of Open Access Journals

Whether in print or electronic format, the cost of journals is still expensive enough to shut out some researchers and interested readers. In 2001 two scientists, Patrick Brown, a biochemist at Stanford University, and Michael Eisen, a computational biologist at the University of California, Berkeley and the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory began an online petition proposal to appeal to scientists to stop submitting papers to journals that did not make the full text of their papers free and without restriction to others after a six-month period from original publication. More than 30,000 scientists signed its pledge to boycott journals that refused to fully release scientific results, but backed down when the publishers called their bluff.²

In October 2003 a nonprofit online publishing project, known as the Public Library of Science or PLoS, began publication with PLoS Biology. The scientists responsible for the project acted on their belief that knowledge should be free and their stated purpose was “. . . convincing existing publishers to change their ways and join. . . in making more information freely available.” Vivian Siegel, the executive editor of PLoS, said the goal of the publishing venture was not to just have a small percentage

of the scientific literature to be freely available but, “. . . we want all the literature to be open access.”³

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However, PLoS itself is not without costs. It is funded by a grant of several million dollars from an American charitable foundation, and there is some concern about the fate of PLoS after the grant ends. “While most journals charge hefty subscription fees, the PLoS intends to pay its way [while keeping the journals free to the users] by charging the scientists whose work is published; it hopes that the funding agencies and charities paying for the research in the first place will pick up the \$1,500 bill.”⁴ Current PLoS policy is to waive the fee for authors who are unable to get funding to pay or who can’t pay the fee themselves.

One advantage of the subscription-charging journals is their reputation for enhancing the prestige and advancing the promotion and tenure process of researchers who publish in the established journals. Many of the larger universities and institutions have strict guidelines on which journals are considered as acceptable and scholarly journals for the tenure and promotion tracks. Will these institutions be willing to accept articles in the open access journals such as PLoS Biology when faculty use these publications to meet the requirements for promotions and tenure?

Advancement of Open Access Journals

Hopefully, with time, open access journals will become well enough known and even be considered “respectable enough” to be accepted as journals for the tenure and promotions tracks. With the advent of PLoS Biology and other PLoS journals that have since been added, it is anticipated that students and faculty will take advantage of these new electronic Internet journals. Certainly PLoS journals and other open access (freely available) journals will open up the scientific and technical readership and further research publication, especially in the poorer countries where the costs of print or electronic subscription journals strains academic institutions and library budgets. Through open access journals, authors and scientists in poorer countries will have access both to scientific and technical discoveries faster, and their own discoveries and breakthroughs will reach the scientific research world faster.

What has been called the “information explosion” with the arrival of computers and the Internet is increasing the breadth and depth of scientific and technical knowledge, reaching more people faster and with lower costs through the open access path. Hopefully the costs of academic, scientific and technical data will remain within the reach of all individuals in the educational and research world and provide more opportunities for new knowledge to be available faster and with less expense to the academic and scientific world.

¹Wand, Patricia. “Inaccessible Information: A Strategic Solution.” *American Libraries* 36, no. 5, May 2005, p. 30.

²Adam, David. “Scientists Take on the Publishers in an Experiment to Make Research Free to All.” *The Guardian*, October 6, 2003 – http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,3604,1056608,00.html.

³Adam – http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,3604,1056608,00.html.

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