IMPLEMENTING E-JOURNAL ACCESS: TWO PERSPECTIVES FROM SCOTLAND

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We present a comparative description of how two Scottish academic libraries provide electronic journal services. These libraries shared the perception that the diversity of the proliferating electronic journal scene created confusion in the eyes of the would-be e-journal user. This in turn gave rise to a separate attempt in each institution to create a unified common interface for the local e-journal portfolio. Points of similarity and difference between the two separate systems are noted. Some thoughts for the future of the e-journal format are provided, based on these libraries' experience in common of mounting their own local services.

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Introduction

The changing nature of the e-journal

Recently there have been significant advances in the field of electronic journal provision in the United Kingdom. This period of advance has seen the format mature from what may be described as a somewhat experimental or exploratory status towards a new position as a valuable practical tool for the dissemination of core academic research information.

Perhaps the most important feature of this progression has been a change in the understanding of what constitutes an electronic journal. Whereas previously the term has been applied to a serial publication that exists purely in an electronic form, many examples now exist of respected hard copy journals which have been launched in parallel electronic versions. The status and recognition enjoyed by the hard copy journal have thus been transferred to the publication in its new format. This conversion of established printed journals into parallel electronic versions has been an important factor in the process by which the e-journal has gained respect and acceptability in the eyes of the mainstream academic journal user.

Agents for change

Such developments could not have taken place in the UK without the efforts of the Higher Education Funding Councils. These bodies have provided the impetus for the creation of a collaborative environment which has enabled publishers to enter into site licence agreements with the broad mass of Higher Education institutions, via the Funding Councils. Moreover, the interest by the UK National Higher Education administration in electronic serial publishing has coincided with the emergence of certain key information technologies, essential to the mass provision of electronic journals. Whereas previously there have been attempts to promote electronic journal services in which a narrowly proprietorial technical system has been central to the delivery of the service, these newer technologies have been free of such restraints. For example, OCLC's prototype online journal

system software GUIDON [implemented at
Glasgow University Library in 1992 to give
access to the Online Journal of Current Clinical
Trials, but now superseded by OCLC's web
system] was an instance of one such project
where the task of licensing the technology
needed to provide the service inhibited a wide
reception of the product. By contrast, the free
availability within the Higher Education
community of widely distributed World Wide
Web software such as Netscape [or similar
WWW browsers] and viewer applications such
as Adobe Acrobat has been an essential factor in
the higher uptake of recent e-journal services -
for example, the UK Higher Education site
licence initiative and NISS's EBSCO Masterfile.

The role of the Library

All of the factors alluded to thus far - an
improvement in the intrinsic quality of the type
of e-journal on offer, high levels of effective,
national-level administrative support,
significant advances in the technological
platform over which e-journals are distributed -
have been positive steps forward in which
academic libraries have acted as passive
beneficiaries deriving advantages from external
agents of change. However, libraries cannot
maintain a purely passive role in the face of
such developments, if they are to gain
maximum benefits from these initiatives.
Indeed, it is now clear that there are a variety of
complex and challenging problems facing any
library that wishes to create a viable electronic
journal service. It would be worthwhile
sketching out these problems before describing
the solutions evolved by the two university
libraries whose practical attempts to make
effective e-journal provision are the subject
matter of this article.

Dealing with diversity

One paramount difficulty is that electronic
journals present themselves as a fragmented
and confusing landscape to the user. Whereas
the hard copy journal user can rely on the
familiar tool of a unified local library holdings
catalogue with title and subject access, the
would-be user of electronic journals confronts a
situation where many electronic journals are

offered as disparate networked services from a
variety of publishers.

The easiest way for a library to offer e-journal
services in such a fragmented situation is to
offer a number of direct electronic links over a
local network to the named services of the
publishers whose serials can be accessed by
right of local institutional subscription. Such a
service is of limited value. No library would
arrange a serials collection with the publisher as
the main ordering principle. It is fair to argue,
therefore, that a successful electronic journal
service should be at least as easy to use as a
hard copy journal service - that is, there should
be title and subject access to a journal collection
listed integrally in the library's main catalogue-
but that in addition, each title/subject record
should be *hyperlinked* directly to the e-journal
provider's server, or preferably to the contents
pages of the individual e-journal itself. Without
such ease of access, many of the unique benefits
of purely electronic publication, such as desk
top access via a computer workstation, count for
little.

In the two institutions concerned, Glasgow
and Strathclyde University Libraries, both came
independently of each other to adopt this
approach to e-journal access in 1996. And in
each case, the decision was made to promote an
improved e-journal service using the local
WWW pages in conjunction with the existing
online catalogue. At neither institution at this
time was there available an integrated *webpac*
system, which could unify the catalogue
function of the OPAC with the hypertext
network functions of WWW services. Rather
than await the development of such a finished
system, it was felt that a workable e-journal
service with the UK pilot site licence initiative
journals at its core could be introduced using
existing information systems, and that the need
for this service was such that any further delay
would have been undesirable.

Glasgow University Library

Aims of e-journal service

At Glasgow University Library, a web-based
model for access to e-journal titles was
developed which had the following features:

- It was not to be publisher driven but rather title driven - that is, a direct link from an A-Z 'hotlinked' title list of serials to a pseudo-catalogue record and then to the 'title page' of the individual e-journal would be provided. The user's need to master publisher-specific access protocols would be rendered as minimal as possible.

- Two different routes of access were offered: alphabetical title access and broad subject access.

- Catalogue records which directed the user to the separate Library web service were added to the OPAC with a view to enhanced use in the longer term (e.g. by having direct hotlinks added via the 856 MARC field to the URL of a fulltext electronic journal, and/or as part of the *webpac* implementation). Where a catalogue record existed beforehand, this was modified to show that additional electronic access was possible via separate Library WWW pages.

Additionally, the service aimed to achieve the following more general goals:

- The service would provide a platform for further discussions with publishers

- It attempted to remove barriers to access by emphasising local support, rather than remote support direct from the service provider.

- It would provide a showcase for promotion of e-journals across campus

Launch of e-journal service

Thus, in Spring 1996 a suite of web pages listing each of the new e-journal titles from the site licence publishers was launched at Glasgow University Library. This replaced the simple handful of links to publishers' own home pages. The majority of the titles in the e-journal collection were full text journals, and the majority of these from established publishers - as remains the case to date. At the outset, however, this helped establish the credibility of the service and made initial promotion easier.

To promote the new service further, and emphasise the Library's role as a major provider of electronic journal services, an 'electronic

journals party' was held in April 1996 for academic staff, with some two hundred journal titles then available via the Library's web pages. This was held in the Library building, rather than in a separate University venue, which again underlined the central role of the Library as a campus-wide electronic service provider, and was attended by over 200 members of staff. The usage of the e-journal service subsequent to this very successful launch event at Glasgow was impressively high - in the period July 1996 to March 1997 the number of downloads logged for the Academic Press e-journal service totalled 1,480 documents. This was the highest level of use in the United Kingdom - about 250 more downloads than King's College London, with Imperial College London, Oxford, and Cambridge universities completing the top five. This testifies to the need for energetic promotional work to underpin the introduction of such an unfamiliar service.

Glasgow has attempted to monitor users' reactions to e-journals by mounting a small survey in April 1997 of those who had attended the 'e-journals party' twelve months before. Among the findings were that few problems in accessing e-journals were reported; that e-journals were preferred to paper for accessibility, but that paper journals were still the more popular format 'overall'; that 'ease of access' was the most frequently cited advantage of e-journals, while problems with reading from the screen, and concerns with the lack of 'portability' were often quoted as disadvantages; and finally that a large minority of this group still did not use e-journals, indicating once more the importance of marketing this new service.

Features of the service

To overcome problems such as the innate unfamiliarity of the medium, and to emphasise the need for an electronic service to offer all the advantages (as far as possible) of a parallel print-based service, the e-journal web pages utilised the same subject headings as those used in the shelf arrangement of Glasgow University Library's hardcopy serials. That is, they represented broad subject terms that coincided with the institutional interests of Glasgow University departments and faculties. No