SEAMLESS ACCESS TO JOURNALS IN THE HYBRID LIBRARY: THE ‘FIND A JOURNAL’ SERVICE

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The authors describe some of the ways in which journal collections are promoted at the University of Sunderland. A key first step has been to make it easy for users to find the journal they are looking for, whether in print or in electronic format, through the ‘Find A Journal’ service. This is complemented by a series of personal approaches to academic staff.

Introduction

In recent years, the availability of electronic journals and alerting services has increased at a dramatic rate. At the same time, it is now widely accepted that printed journals will be with us for the foreseeable future. The collections of most academic libraries now include a mix of print and electronic journals and an increasing number of journals can be accessed in many different ways. In these ‘hybrid libraries’ the challenge for academic librarians is to offer easy, jargon-free and seamless access to print and electronic journals, wherever they might be located - physically or virtually. In addition librarians must also promote and maximise usage, at a time when journals account for a major proportion of library expenditure in many academic libraries. This paper describes the ‘Find A Journal’ service developed at the University of Sunderland which provides a single point of information and access for both print and electronic journals, and goes on to suggest ways in which library staff could promote electronic journals more effectively to their academic community.

Information Services at the University of Sunderland are delivered through four site libraries, each serving one or more Schools. The service is characterised, among other things, by a strong emphasis on access rather than holdings, recognising that, as a new university, we cannot build large collections in the same way as some of the older universities. Senior staff are charged with delivering ‘information leadership’ to the academic community, not least by active and sustained promotion of new services and developments.

The University has a growing number of distance learners and many staff and students have access to the Internet from home. Electronic services are a vitally important element of the distributed library service and, since 1996, access to electronic journal titles has risen from zero to around 4,000 titles. However, a large proportion...
of the budget is still spent on printed journals. The need to maximise the use of both print and electronic journals, is therefore a huge driving factor, especially in a University which prides itself on its 'lean and fit' operations. Each journal, print and electronic, has to earn its place in our collection.

The hybrid library – the challenge for librarians

It has always been a challenge to make users aware of what information is available in printed journals and the best ways of getting full value from them. The development of electronic bibliographic databases helped us to exploit our print collections more fully than in the past, particularly among first year undergraduates. In promoting journal literature in the hybrid environment there are some added challenges for our staff, in particular for staff who only work for part of the week, or part of the year. Many of these issues have been well discussed in the professional literature. They include:

- overcoming IT phobia on the part of users;
- helping users who do not have the appropriate IT skills;
- managing passwords for different services;
- finding our way around a variety of different interfaces;
- understanding and implementing licencing restrictions;
- keeping up with the changes!

The hybrid environment has also contributed to another major change which is being experienced throughout the higher education sector - the increase in numbers of distance learners. Such students may well be using library facilities from outside our geographical sites for the majority of their studying and learning activities. This raises the question of ensuring that licences (which vary tremendously) are correctly adhered to, so that authorised users, and only authorised users, have the access they should.

What library staff need is a simple but effective system which can be quickly and easily updated and edited, and which will make the appropriate information and access available to staff and users in the most user-friendly and efficient manner. The medium of delivery is only relevant in-so-far as it affects the way in which we arrange access and the number of people to whom we are able to offer it – but this is a significant challenge.

The hybrid library – the challenge for users

In general, users are looking for the answer to the question "Have you any articles on...?", closely followed by "How do I get them?" and usually with the proviso "...as quickly as possible". Other students may arrive armed with reading lists, quoting journal or article titles, and others with lists of citations from electronic bibliographic databases.

A number of service providers aim to simplify the difficulties of accessing different publishers’ material by offering access to an aggregation of electronic journals from different publishers. These include BIDS ingenta, SwetsNet, Blackwell’s Electronic Journals Navigator, and OCLC’s Electronic Collections Online (ECO). Our experience suggests that the proliferation of such aggregation services can further confuse matters. Users generally do not know where to access which journal amongst the myriad of Web sites, all with different interfaces and search engines, and are simply bewildered by references to IDEAL, ingenta, ECO, etc.

The situation is further complicated if the required journal is only available in print. Until recently, users at Sunderland would have to check the online catalogue (OPAC) for the print journal, and then check one or more aggregation services on our Web site to see if we held it in electronic form. After all these searches they might also find that the title was not available in any format!

‘Find A Journal’

Sunderland’s response to the challenges outlined above has been the development of a service which we have called ‘Find A Journal’. This is a database of all our print and electronic journal subscriptions created in-house by our IT Development Team. The user accesses ‘Find A Journal’ from our Web site (1) and is introduced to the system with a short description of the service and a search screen. (See Figure 1).

One of the most important things about ‘Find A Journal’ is its name. It describes what the user is trying to do, it makes no differentiation between print and electronic journals and it is easy to remember.
The user can enter either a journal title or subject keywords, and will be taken to records for the relevant journal or journals. Both title and description fields of the records are being searched. The database includes print journals, electronic-only journals, and print journals with electronic access to which we have current subscriptions. The record for each journal shows whether we have electronic access, print holdings or both. For electronic versions, there is a hyperlink from the title, and the further information given on the record includes password information if necessary, and whether ATHENS authentication is required. Where we
have print holdings the record will include location and class number.

Access from outside the University of Sunderland’s network (which includes home users) is prevented except for registered students who are distance learners and who are given their own password to access the system. Distance learners can apply for photocopies of articles which are only available as print, via our distance learning co-ordinator.

Benefits

The main benefit to staff is that ‘Find A Journal’ provides a single gateway for both access to, and information on, all our current journal subscriptions, whether the user wants a particular title or any title covering a particular subject area. It is straightforward to demonstrate to users, and the direct links mean that staff do not have to remember where to find particular journals amongst the myriad of providers. Instead, staff time can be re-allocated to help users with more complex enquiries.

The inclusion of password information where appropriate, at the point of use, is convenient for staff and also means that changes in the passwords or access arrangements can easily be made, without the need for large-scale information-shots to all staff. The information is held on an Access database, so that changes can be made globally with a few simple keystrokes. The system helps staff to promote journal use and encourage full exploitation of all our journal material, regardless of the method of access. It is simple to use and is quickly and easily accessed from the library’s home page.

For many users, in particular those with basic IT skills, the single gateway should make use of the collection easier and clearer. Some users will continue to access journals via the OPAC, particularly when they know which journal they need. However, for most users, the ability to search all the available resources in a variety of formats is a far more efficient use of their time than conducting a search on a commercial bibliographic database. Such searches inevitably produce references to materials that cannot be accessed locally - leaving the user frustrated and dissatisfied. ‘Find A Journal’ eliminates the need for detailed instructions to the user. The user no longer has to leave one system and access another system and the hyper-link from the journal title on each record makes the process as seamless as possible for the user.

The electronic approach - some challenges

Any librarian involved in information skills training knows the frustrations of servers being down or painfully slow to access, especially during the later part of the day in term-time. Problems such as these are the electronic equivalent of pages torn out or missing issues. We hope that by bringing together all the access options, including details of print subscriptions, we can minimise all these problems and raise the level of success in finding the required material, whilst maximising the use of our print collections.

Like colleagues at Glasgow, Strathclyde and Loughborough [1213], we will be using a Web server route and OPAC route side-by-side and we are currently investigating ways in which we can import catalogue records from our OPAC straight into the ‘Find A Journal’ database.

We feel that it is important to include electronic resource information on the library catalogue in order to show a complete record of available material. Separate access to individual journal services and databases by title and subject area is also available from the Web Links section of our Web page. ‘Find A Journal’ aims to maximise the use of print and electronic journals. However, although we are able to monitor the use of our electronic services, we still have the perennial difficulty of trying to obtain accurate usage figures for print journals.

How long did it take?

The project took approximately three months of full-time work to input the bulk of the printed journal details and about two days of our IT Officer’s time to set up the database. Most electronic journal suppliers were able to send us their databases of holdings which were imported into the Access database.

Work on ‘Find A Journal’ is ongoing, however, due to the dynamic nature of journal subscriptions. It must be recognised that in such an unstable environment as electronic publishing, inputting and maintaining links to electronic journals can be time-consuming. Some publishers,
such as MCB, offer dynamic links so that the user is never linked to an out-of-date site. This service is extremely useful and will, hopefully, be adopted by other publishers. Internally, we plan to automate many of the time-intensive processes necessary to maintain 'Find A Journal' and we envisage that the database will be largely self-maintaining in the course of the next twelve months.

The personal touch

'Find A Journal' has enabled us to simplify the process of locating relevant journals and this was an absolutely vital first step in our effort to increase the use of all our journals. Experience suggests that academic staff are reluctant to come to information skills sessions in the library and anything which is publicised as being a 'new' service is an immediate turn-off. In the last three years, we have tried a number of approaches, most of which are commonplace in academic libraries. These include: 'show and tell' sessions in the libraries; presentations at school (faculty) conferences; an IT and Me roadshow to each school; and articles in University newsletters.

In 1999/2000, we plan a wholly different approach to complement the 'Find a journal' service. Our thrust is much more on 'outreach', with librarians targeting key researchers, professors and other staff. Ideas include:

- each assistant librarian to target key research teams in the University and meet them for coffee and a demonstration of 'Find A Journal' and alerting services. For alerting services, we will make sure that each researcher is set up with a profile. We hope that a cascade effect will follow, with individual researchers telling their colleagues. We are aiming to target 50 researchers in the first year using this method;
- target academics who we know use particular print journals and promote the electronic version;
- set up a 'CyberJournal Day' in the schools and invite academic staff and researchers to try out electronic journals;
- where an electronic version of a journal is available, put up shelf guides to alert users that they are now on the Web, and where;
- site librarians will invite themselves to meetings of the Senior Management Team of each school for a ten minute slot on electronic services twice a year;
- target all the professors in each school and ask if we can have coffee with them and show them some electronic services at their desktop;
- contact the Chair of the Research Committee and ask for a slot at the next meeting to discuss how the library can support the next Research Assessment Exercise in 2001....not forgetting to mention the number of journals which are now available electronically! Set up each committee member with a profile beforehand.

Clearly, a number of the above rely to some extent on the onerous task of having coffee with one group of academics or another! Our experience suggests that academic staff are more likely to respond to overtures in their own office, with services they can access from their desktop, rather than coming to the library. However, we are aware that some academics may have very outdated equipment and this could be counterproductive.

Next steps

'Find A Journal' has been promoted to academic staff since July 1999. The database is incomplete and we still have many more titles to add but we have now achieved a critical mass. Feedback from our front-line staff suggests that 'Find a Journal' is proving hugely useful and it is now embedded within our induction programme and information skills sessions.

In the next academic year, our efforts will be focused on promoting the service to our academic community through the sort of initiatives outlined above. At the same time, we shall be looking at ways to extract the data about our print and electronic collections direct from our library catalogue and straight onto the 'Find a Journal' database. Since we now catalogue all our journals, this would mean a substantial reduction in staff time on this activity.

Looking to the future, we anticipate engaging commercial suppliers in a dialogue to provide seamless access to our print holdings as well as electronic journals, from commercial databases. At the time of writing, we have just started a discussion with EBSCO, who provide us with electronic journals on a city-wide basis. We are
looking for a system which will link print journals, electronic journals and electronic databases, so that our users do not have to enter and exit several different systems. With these services linked electronically, our users can be instantly guided to the full text whether they begin the search in a specific database or electronic journal. When an article is not available electronically, they can be further guided to the hard copy if it is available in our local holdings.

Conclusion

The hybrid library presents us with a number of challenges and also some opportunities. We have the challenge of simplifying the process whereby our users can find the journal they are looking for. If we do this effectively, we have the opportunity to maximise the use of our print and electronic collections and to provide value for money for our institutions. Unless academic librarians promote new services, and show 'information leadership' to the academic community, there is a very real danger that we may be sidelined or marginalised by those academics and researchers who will simply access new services on their own.

References

1. http://www.library.sunderland.ac.uk