Reports on briefing sessions and workshops held at the 26th UKSG Annual Conference

Local digital article archives (or creating institutional e-print repositories): practical tips

Bill Hubbard, Project Manager and Stephen Pinfield, Project Director, SHERPA, University of Nottingham

This workshop was held over two different days and looked at the practical issues raised in creating institutional repositories of e-prints. Discussion generated feedback from delegates on their own experiences and perspectives of the topic. Delegates included librarians, publishers and systems suppliers, each with their own viewpoint.

The basic issues of institutional repositories were reviewed, including the software available, and the use of the Open Archives Initiative Metadata Harvesting Protocol (OAI-PMH). There is a clear need for a well defined collection policy to inform the whole procedure of repository creation, affecting what constitutes an ‘e-print', what document types and formats are acceptable and what quality controls are needed for both e-prints themselves and the e-print metadata. Metadata standards and quality issues were reviewed, along with preservation standards, detailing what author permissions are needed and what choices have to be made for long-term preservation.

Overall, the majority of work needed to build and populate a repository is not technological, but involves cultural change within an institution, both to recognise the utility of the idea and to change working practices to integrate repositories into a university's procedures. Academics need support in dealing with questions of IPR and copyright and the new procedure of self-archiving.

The benefits of repositories were discussed, both for academics, in terms of dismantling access and impact barriers to their work, but also benefits on an institutional level, affecting the way that the research output of a university can be registered, measured and used. The effect of such repositories on publishers' business models was discussed. Many publishers now do not regard such repositories as a threat and are happy to allow academic authors the right to self-archive material. It was recognised by all that it is possible for e-print repositories to work as a complement to existing structures and that this new hybrid approach to scholarly communication structures was the most likely and best solution for the future.

Designing effective websites

Sam Phillips, Ingenta plc

These sessions covered some basic usability principles and guided attendees to other resources to discover some ‘rules' regarding usability.

The three elements of a website that need to be considered from a user's perspective are:

- visual design (how it looks)
- content design (how it reads)
- information architecture (how it is organised, and navigation)

For both content and visual design, the ‘less is more' principle was advocated. If the page doesn't suffer without the image/extra colour/extra font/wavy bit, then don't put it in. Double check any graphic is adding to the usability of the page.

Findings from user studies were shared with the groups:

- People tend not to spend more than 10 seconds on a page before they move on to the next one.
- People read web pages by zigzagging for what they can find.

Advice arising out of these observations was to draft your copy, then cut it in half. And then cut it in half again. Bullet points and very clean, short copy are advantages in this kind of environment.

A website that is well designed with a good information architecture allows users to be clear about what they can do next, and how to do it. While hiring an information architect as a consultant is one way forward when planning and designing a site, another way to make sure you are doing the right thing is to test your site plans every step of the way.

The main message of the session focused on user testing – to be sure you are getting it right on your site and to be sure that your site is easy to use and makes sense to users, you must test your work. Testing is cheap and easy, requiring a couple of friends or neighbours, a pen and a piece of paper, and should be done often and early in the planning of a website.

The groups looked at some paper mock-ups of home pages and internal pages of websites and talked through testing methods, and discovered for themselves how cheap, and quick and easy user testing was.

E-journal admin – reducing the cost

Rollo Turner, Association of Subscription Agents and Intermediaries

From figures relating to the UK market it appears that of the total expenditure on serials (subscriptions, library staff, systems, buildings etc) only 30-40% is spent on content, about 2% on agents and the remaining 60-70% is spent by libraries on staff, buildings, acquisition, access and the provision of library services to users. If future cost savings are to be made the big gains are probably in library services. This workshop focused on the administration of acquisition and access rather than the provision of services to users.

Acquisition has become very fragmented in recent years, with many sources (aggregator databases, agents, consortia, agents direct with publishers etc). Pricing is now highly complex with many options: e-only, e + print, deep discounts, e-only packages, price based on consortium, FTEs etc. This presents challenges to obtain the correct price and source information, and to fully cost the renewal process involving all options.

Access is also liable to substantial administration including URL maintenance, registration of subscriptions, troubleshooting and rectifying access denials etc.

The challenge is to find common areas where automation, exchange of experience or third party solutions can bring considerable savings to libraries, and also publishers and agents.

Discussion

Subjects listed for discussion were: URL maintenance; registration; adding e-journals to the OPAC; coverage – i.e. years accessed, what is included in an electronic subscription; licence management and standard licences; access denials; 'start any time' subs with different start dates for electronic and print; price file maintenance; information/reporting; hidden costs e.g. VAT, debundling, and change management.

Licence management

One of the common threads throughout the workshop was the question of what was covered by the many licences. Frequently, the important points were buried in the legal text. One proposal, which found considerable support, was for a service which would provide a matrix of publishers and the main points of their licences in plain language. Information which should definitely be included in such a service should include:

- standard licence used (if any)
- definition of site, authorized user, and access rights
- ILL conditions
- perpetual access rights
- coverage i.e. years included etc.

Registration

This was considered to be especially frustrating; the work could not be handed off to agents because publishers insisted the customer registered directly. A need was expressed for better information on what was required to register, for example it was frustrating to be told halfway through the process that a subscription number (Publishers' ID number) was required which could be found on the address label, since this would have been thrown away probably by check-in elsewhere in the library. Contact points at publishers for obtaining such information were frequently not given or when called did not know the relevant numbers (or had never heard of them!). If agents were to provide a pre-registration service detailing all the information for all publishers, not just those on their Gateway, this would help but it would need to be correct. Agents were seen as sometimes giving out incorrect information by the groups. More standardisation in this process would also help considerably and it was felt by some that this process should, wherever possible be automated so that when a subscription was taken out or renewed the information (if not the signature) could be automatically entered on publishers' and agents' systems and as much pre set-up work done in advance as possible. Providing such information was seen as a valuable service, and keeping subscription numbers on a database was considered the ideal way – preferably done by agents for many.

Communications and access denials

Much of the three discussions centred on communications or the lack thereof. This was especially true where access denials happened. Frequently, libraries did not know who to contact at the publisher (and vice versa). Agents, whilst in some cases being very helpful sometimes gave incorrect information and were rarely responsible for all journals taken by a library. It was also clear that information was being exchanged but not always to the right people or in the right way. For example, problems associated with access denials are viewed by librarians as being very urgent indeed. However they were frequently treated by publishers as of little importance. Sometimes answers were coming back from agents but bundled up with non-urgent matters relating to paper subscriptions which might be delivered to other staff in the library. Suggestions were that agents, publishers and libraries needed to rethink how they communicated with each other especially with matters relating to access denials, and ensure correct information went to the correct people. Publishers needed to be able to respond faster and in a more customer friendly manner. Agents were generally seen as a desirable means of obtaining this information but need to cover all journals. Information in publishers' Newsletters etc. was fine but it takes time to scan through all publishers' material for access related issues which were often poorly flagged e.g. the transfer of journals from one publisher to another.

Apart from the communication issues there were other areas connected with not knowing or being able to check access rights easily. This is connected with licence management (see above). A particular irritation was the coverage of a journal, where it was often unclear when purchasing a title which years were covered by the subscription. There needs to be some way of defining these access rights both in terms of the years and volumes covered by virtue of the subscription paid, whether the online and paper versions are identical etc. It was recognised that there are difficulties given the variety of different licences a library may have with consortium arrangements, aggregators, subscriptions through agents or direct etc.

Conclusions

Many of the challenges librarians face on a day-to-day basis would be helped by clearer channels of communication between the three parties involved – libraries, agents and publishers. There was a need for publishers and agents to improve the quality and speed of service where access denial was the problem and to set up different and quicker lines of communication than is the case with print.

There is clearly a need for better information systems to enable librarians to know precisely what access rights they have for any specific title and the basic terms of the licences they hold. Agents were seen to have a major role to play in providing these services and it was generally recognised that this was a chargeable service but should help to lower overall admin costs.

Influencing your paymasters using performance indicators

Roger Brown, Manager, Contracts and Licensing, GlaxoSmithKline

Each of the three workshops was well attended and had a good mix of librarians, publishers and agents/hosts etc. This report is an amalgam of the three workshops.

After an introduction from the leader, the topic was introduced by a review of what performance indicators are value measures, and how this value can then be demonstrated to the paymaster in your organisation. The scenario was set of a service faced with potential cuts in resources (not an unusual event for many!) If you had collected such value measures in advance, then you would be well placed to respond to that challenge with some good data and hopefully be able to demonstrate to your organisation that your service is having a positive effect on the business and is worthy of their continued support and funding, So what to collect? Does usage data equate to value? Clearly not, but it is an important element that provides the backbone on which to set other performance indicators. The recent COUNTER proposals should help to ensure standardisation and consistency of usage reports. It was recommended that usage metrics be collected systematically so that they are ready for when they are needed.

Some of the other elements that were discussed included collecting customer feedback, developing case studies and surveys.

All feedback should be collected and analysed. This might identify a customer who could be the subject of a case study, particularly if they are a senior person or one with influence in the organisation. Surveys have their place if they are selective and with a defined purpose. If these can demonstrate time savings or business impact, then they can be powerful tools.

We then moved on to look at how these performance indicators can be reported upwards to fundholders. This very much depends of the nature of the organisation in which you work. Comment from academia was that it might be difficult to identify the right target person or department. The nature of the report was probably more important than the content. The key message was to keep it brief, with just a few bullet points, and a graphic or two. Timing of reports was also important, with the period just before budget setting the ideal time, if it can be so arranged.

There was also some discussion about the performance indicators that publishers might be collecting. It seems that these were mainly in the areas of editorial and production. The topic of low use titles (as indicated by usage metrics) was a thorny issue that we didn't solve!

Building relationships in the information chain

Nancy Gerry, Blackwell Publishing Ltd
Richard Steeden, EBSCO

The seminar encouraged participants to consider what they believe works effectively in communication and where they saw the need for improvements and refinements. Some of the mechanisms by which agents, publishers and librarians communicate with one another were discussed.

Complexity

It was clear from the three sessions that the supply chain is becoming increasingly complex and that as yet, there was no clear demarcation or expectation lines in terms of responsibilities. For instance, it was pointed out that for the subscription agent, there is the increasing expectation that they should be familiar with and be able to effectively communicate what can often be complex and bespoke publisher based pricing models, and often represent a publisher or database provider to a library or consortium. This can easily result in a duplication of resources where both publisher and agent run sales and customer service teams, communication lines become blurred and as a consequence cost is increased.

Librarians might consider the benefits of clarity in their expectations. Do they prefer customer service and helpdesk type services to be provided by their agents or by each publisher from which they purchase content?

It was suggested that there was a clear need for some form of central repository for publisher licences and pricing policies and that UKSG could theoretically provide such a facility. The agents present pointed out that their systems already contain much of this type of information which they increasingly have facilities to make available, but there was the lingering question over whether libraries would be prepared to pay for this type of value added service.

What works well

It was agreed that in general there is effective communication between publishers and agents in ensuring continuity through the e-journal life cycle with particular recognition of the need for increased grace periods. On this theme it was also considered whether the whole issue of gracing was ineffective as it encouraged decisions to be hedged and that it might be more efficient to encourage rigorous implementation of subscription periods?

It was acknowledged that publishers are increasingly automating the process of updating subscription records to ensure accurate online listings.

Librarians tended to agree that it was beneficial to have regular dialogue with their agents and publishers, and commented about the value of meeting the relevant contacts in the customer service offices that are involved most extensively in the day-to-day work on their accounts. It was also pointed out that if the expectation is for hands on personal service, then there is an inevitable cost in providing that level of service, which might need to be passed on the customer.

What isn't working

Regular bugbears or breakdowns in communication were discussed. Examples included the elusive PID (or reference number required to activate the e-journal), the movement of titles between publishers and the communication of title changes. Librarians especially asked that the publisher make the PID number easily accessible. This data could also be usefully communicated by the agent, one of the biggest frustrations being the need to keep hold of a mailing label to obtain a number to activate an online subscription.

Conclusions

It seems clear that there is considerable overlap especially between publishers and agents in communicating with the library in the online environment. With both parties duplicating resources in areas such as helpdesk and customer service provision, this clearly adds significant cost. Librarians will need to make their expectations clear in terms of who they expect to deal with and when – for instance if they prefer the help desk type support to be provided centrally by their agents or by each content provider?

It was generally recognised that there is a significant benefit in personal customer service, which can be enhanced by regular site visits so effective working relationships can develop between the key players. It was understood that providing this level of attention couldn't be sustained in the long term without impacting on service charges etc.

The continuing headache seems to be the elusive PID and that we have still to find an appropriate mechanism for communicating this to the library in sufficient time that delays don't occur. The role of the gateway services was acknowledged as potentially beneficial in reducing this type of administration and bringing greater continuity to the provision of online access.

Time to take control

Susan Kay, Professional Adviser, CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals)

I was delighted to be asked to run a series of workshops at this year's UKSG conference to assist delegates to look at their own marketability in light of the current, rather difficult work environment. Attendees were invited to step outside their comfort zones to examine both their current experience and their future expectations.

The sessions also served as an introduction to the idea of portfolio lifestyles and the adoption of CPD (career planning and development) as a structured method of controlling the changes necessary in any career to ensure that professionals stay current and well-informed, anticipating future trends and training requirements. We also examined ways to develop good habits around continuous and honest personal skills auditing.

While travelling to the conference, the words of a song embedded themselves in my mind and I realised that the singer had a point worth emphasising: "You've got to be bad ……." This led to some very lively discussions around what delegates would have to do in their own environments in order to make an impression on line managers and senior management teams. The very serious issues of image building and marketing of services were, of course, at the heart of these issues.

These were hugely enjoyable sessions to which the delegates contributed generously and enthusiastically from their own experience and the groups quickly and reassuringly found much common ground, despite the fact that a wide variety of organisations and sectors were represented.

Challenging the crisis in scholarly communication: a role for the Open Archives Initiative (OAI)?

William J Nixon, Project Manager: Service Development (DAEDALUS) University of Glasgow

This briefing session began with an overview of the current crisis in scholarly communication: its origins, implications and consequences. This included a definition of 'scholarly communication' and a range of facts and figures demonstrating the breadth of journals (20,000 peer-reviewed journals) and the rise in the journal price index.

It then looked at a range of alternative publishing solutions, outlining the Budapest Open Access Initiative and its twin track approach of open access journals and open access archives.

There was a particular focus on the emergence of the Open Archives Initiative (OAI) and the development of institutional repositories. The OAI has established a protocol for metadata harvesting (OAI-PMH) which enables research communities to set up cross-searchable repositories of papers. These repositories provide an opportunity for researchers to increase the impact of their work by making it freely available. International initiatives such as the FAIR Programme in the UK and the work of the Group of Eight in Australia in establishing ePrints services as well as a range of US institutions have ensured that the OAI has been adopted globally.

The session also considered the impact of the OAI in the wider context of scholarly communication and the range of issues which it brings. These issues include intellectual property rights, technical standards and the range of policies which institutions need to consider when they set up a repository.

The presentation concluded with a report on the developments of the DAEDALUS Project at the University of Glasgow. DAEDALUS is a three-year JISC-funded project to set up a range of different repositories at Glasgow. These include published and peer-reviewed papers, pre-prints and e-theses.

Improving website accessibility

Terry Hulbert, Institute of Physics Publishing
Stuart Smith, MIMAS (Manchester Computing)

We considered the impact of Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) 2001. Stuart focused on the practicality of approaching legislative compliance with regard specifically to websites, whilst Terry looked at the various examples of the interpretations of the legislation.

SENDA places the onus on academic institutions to make sure that educational facilities are available to all. When trying to address the issue of accessibility it became apparent that most MIMAS sites were maintained by content NOT web specialists. MIMAS has tried to address this issue through the introduction of Cascading Style Sheets and other web technologies to remove or at least minimise the need for content developers to have an in-depth working knowledge to produce accessible websites. A pilot run by MIMAS to consider this option has proved successful and the approach has been widely adopted within the organisation.

Terry went on to consider how SENDA may be applied, and pointed out that although just introduced in the UK, similar legislation was already in place in many parts of the world. The USA has been particularly active in responding. The IoP (Institute of Physics) were already being asked to ensure their products were accessible. Even if the law did not exist in the UK, there remains international pressure and good reasons for UK organisations to respond sooner rather than later. He also discussed the need to make sure that organisational decision makers knew of the issues and were given facts to make sure they could allocate resources. Terry also raised the issue that accessibility was more than just legislation; it was also an ethical issue.

It was generally accepted that to make new applications accessible was far easier than to retrofit existing ones.