

# Key issues

## Courting controversy: views of a not-so-secret agent

An article from a subscription agent that does not seek to keep everyone happy by offering neutral statements about their historical role as partner to both the suppliers and consumers of scholarly journals. Can subscription agents afford to be controversial at a time when their very future is being questioned in an age of consortia and the Big Deal? Here is a break with tradition that will hopefully generate some discussion and, if nothing else, provide John Cox (who will be presenting a paper at the 2003 UK Serials Group Conference on the future role of the serials vendor) with some food for thought.



**PAUL HARWOOD**

(The author writes in a personal capacity on this matter)

Librarians have used subscription agents as the principal tool for reducing the cost of acquiring scholarly journals. Well, you say, isn't that the role of the agent? Of course it is, but in recent years we have moved way beyond that to the point that the agent has been used as a means of reducing the unit cost of scholarly journals because of the failure of the library community to bring publisher price increases under control and in line with reality. To that end it has become more a case of how agents are used to help reduce the cost of the journals themselves, rather than libraries benefiting from the efficiencies agents bring to the acquisition process. There is now a general expectation amongst librarians that they do not have to pay for the services of their agent. How many times over the last year have I heard from a librarian, "We are paying you to provide this service" – to which the polite but very honest answer is, "Well actually, with great respect, you're not!"

Agents have fallen back on their other source of income, a commission from some publishers, to offset reduced or non-existent handling charges to libraries to the extent that it has become both acceptable and entirely reasonable to librarians that this is how agents make their money. "It's okay to push these guys for an additional discount since they are making it back further up the supply

chain". This is no longer sustainable and clarity for all parties is absolutely necessary now. The commission that some publishers give to agents is for services provided in making life easier for them. This cannot subsidise the costs of agents' services to libraries or be used to help librarians in their historic battle with publishers on the price of journal literature.

Electronic publishing has at last given librarians the opportunity to exert some pressure on publishers in the pricing battleground. Alternative publishing, in all its different guises, may start to co-exist with commercial publishing and act as a restraint on price increases in future years, and library involvement in initiatives like SPARC has generated much interest and some success in this area. If libraries are now tackling the serials crisis by devoting their energies in this area rather than vicariously via the agent, then maybe the latter has a chance to prove their added value? Not if some publishers have anything to do with it. Their often undisclosed aim of seeking to do business directly with libraries will not only undermine this effort but will serve to push up the costs of acquiring journals as libraries have to take on the onerous administration and management that has traditionally been provided by the agent. The clearest explanation of this that I have seen comes from Steve Bosch at the University of Arizona who

said, "Removing agents from the current business model shifts costs and services to customers without any positive reason for customers to embrace this change".

Okay, so publishers cut out their commission to agents and ask their customers to take on the additional administrative burden. Fine I suppose, if you take a fairly self-interested view on matters, but how does that square with some recent analysis from the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP) in the UK who, in supporting an argument as to why the price of electronic journals may be no cheaper than their printed equivalents, suggested that subscription management costs for publishers have increased by 5%? Now I know that many people argue that all parties are in transition mode and need the freedom and opportunity to explore new business models and ways of working but come on, this doesn't stack up: libraries incurring greater costs due to increased administration, and publishers saving a bit in not having to give commission to agents yet incurring additional costs – of the order of 5% – in subscription management, the classic strength of the agent.

In marked contrast to their diminishing returns, agents have been investing consistently over the last 20 years in value-added products and services for the library community, again with the general expectation that these offerings are for free. What frustrates me more than the fact that this perception still prevails (and yes, agents are probably guilty of perpetuating this) is the cry from some quarters that agents have not grasped their opportunities over the years and have been neither creative nor innovative in this area. Well, consolidation services, EDI services, serials management systems, online subscription management systems, table of contents services, full text access services, licence negotiation and management services don't suggest to me that agents have been sitting on their hands for the last 20 years. Add to that the leadership position they are assuming in the area of e-procurement linking and end-user ordering services, and the fact that they have without exception got involved in almost all the publisher or library-related initiatives associated with the move from printed

to electronic journals (CrossRef, DOI, COUNTER) and it doesn't suggest to me that there has been much hand-sitting going on.

Of course, agents have no more right to survive and prosper than any of the players in the communication chain and I am not seeking a sympathy vote or making a plea for special attention. In these rapidly changing times, only the most innovative and fleet-footed organisations will survive and only then if they can demonstrate beyond all doubt their value-added proposition. I just wonder whether we have all got a little bit carried away with the sexy and glamorous side of electronic journals and overlooked the fact that many of the processes associated with acquiring printed journals still holds true in the electronic world, and there are a few new ones to add. Much of this is around processes and procedures for administration and management.

As much as agents want to be part of this glamorous side, they should accept, and not be ashamed to admit, that their traditional strength and value-added offering to both publishers and libraries has been in the area of efficient administration, helping both parties to reduce costs and improve services. As I noted from a recent quote in a magazine on the opportunities afforded by the internet, "...but the most promising opportunities are the boring bits of processes and functions that are hidden from the public eye: tools for transactions, orders, invoices and payments, credit and risk management". Historically, and into the future, this is a big part of what agents are about and where they add value to the process of scholarly communication. The sooner publishers and libraries recognise this, the sooner we can all focus on our own role in the chain and concentrate our efforts on developing and refining our products and services rather than wasting time, energy and money on continually looking over our shoulder.

---

**Paul Harwood is Regional Director, Swets  
Blackwell, Oxford**

**E-mail: [pharwood@uk.swetsblackwell.com](mailto:pharwood@uk.swetsblackwell.com)**

**This article will also appear in *Serials Librarian***

---