

Stock checking e-journals: the experience of King's College London

Stock checks of print journals have long been a feature of good serials management, but there has not been an equivalent for e-journals. At King's College we thought we ought to do something about that. This paper describes our approach and our findings. A checklist shows what we feel are the most important aspects to such an operation, and can be adapted by other libraries interested in undertaking something similar. Limitations of SFX are noted as are common problems with e-journal management. It is not felt that an automated solution to stock checking e-journals is imminent.



STEPHEN PROWSE

Journals/Document
Delivery Co-ordinator
Information Services
Centre
King's College London



CATRIN SLY

Electronic Journals Senior
Information Assistant
Maughan Library and
Information Services Centre
King's College London

Not really a stock check

As part of the task of managing our journal collections at King's we undertake regular stock checks. This involves going to the shelves and checking our print holdings against the catalogue and then noting differences – usually missing issues and volumes, but just occasionally titles held but not listed. Once we have firmly established that missing items are not going to be found, because they have been misplaced, stolen or were never received, then the catalogue is updated. It varies according to site but these checks take place every couple of years or so. While this provides us with a good picture of our print stock we do not do anything similar for our electronic stock. We suspect we are not alone in this.

In 2005, being in that happy position of coming towards the end of an academic year with some unspent money to burn, we decided to put some to good use by employing a student helper to carry out an e-journal stock check. Actually, stock check is a misleading term since we are not checking if every volume/issue is available online – we would need an army of robots to do that. It should more realistically be termed an e-journal accessibility check. What we are doing is checking that we have

access to e-journals that we should have access to and don't have access to any e-journals that we should not have access to (e.g. because we have not paid for a subscription). Our aim is to ensure that our online e-journals list provides users with accurate information and that access is available to subscribed content.

The set-up at King's

The Journals/Document Delivery (JDD) team is spread across five sites of King's and comprises one co-ordinator, two supervisors, one e-journals senior information assistant (SIA) and a number of other SIAs, with support from information assistants. One supervisor manages the ordering, cataloguing and payment for all journals across the sites while the e-journals SIA manages the setting up, access and maintenance of the e-journals collection. We subscribe to approximately 3,250 print journals and around 9,500 e-journals. Unlike print, our e-journals have never been catalogued. Instead, an A-Z list web list has been produced and maintained from a detailed spreadsheet. While still

using a spreadsheet to store all our information about e-journals, since September 2005 we have been making use of SFX to produce online listing and search facilities.

The limitations of SFX

SFX is the well-known link resolver that allows libraries to offer simple and easy access to full text and other services from a click on a button. At its heart is an extensive knowledge base (KB) that holds publisher portfolios of e-journals. From here, the e-journals SIA can manage our collection by amending portfolios, adding access information, limiting to certain years, producing statistical reports, and so on. Updates to the KB are produced monthly. As long as the library keeps up to date with running these, then the e-journal collection should be fairly current. However, the KB can be slow to include changes e.g. one journal title change in the Haworth Press portfolio took several months to appear, and a Wiley back-file collection contained incorrect titles for many months. Thanks to the ongoing development of the product we are now able to input individual titles into the KB, so that we can keep abreast of such changes. However, in the fast changing world of e-journals we cannot rely upon SFX being 100% accurate. Despite its limitations, this is not so much a fault of the product as simply being the nature of the environment. Indeed, the fault will more often lie with publishers themselves.

Typical problems include late processing by the publisher of our payment for a subscription, resulting in instant removal of online access. Often, e-journals staff are alerted, not by the publisher, but by a student or academic who was trying to download a full-text article only to be informed that the subscription has expired – actually not true, since the renewal payment has been made. Titles frequently change publisher, and whilst communication of such changes is now improving, often e-journals staff have been unaware of a change until another complaint from a user. E-journal holdings also change, often without notification being sent to staff. SFX-generated problems include cases where a publisher has digitized back-files and so offers content back to the first date of publication for an additional fee. The SFX KB is then updated with these new dates, regardless of whether we have subscribed to

the additional content or not, thereby giving users the impression that we subscribe to more content than we do.

The initial project

During the summer of 2005 funding was made available which enabled us to employ a temporary staff member to help with various small projects. One of these was to do a simple accessibility check of e-journals. At the time we were using locally produced static web listings of e-journals, rather than SFX-generated listings. The task involved ensuring that links to e-journals were working correctly and that we had access to the correct content. Due to time constraints only around half of our titles were checked during the project, but the exercise proved very useful and highlighted a number of problems. Most related to changes in the amount of content available, with either more or less available than recorded. Online access had been lost to a number of titles, with staff unaware that this had happened. Other problems such as broken links were also found. In most cases, e-journals staff were able to resolve these issues, ensuring an improved level of service to our users. But it was clear that a more rigorous check of our whole 'stock' would be invaluable and so a decision was taken to incorporate a regular e-journal 'stock check' into routine annual tasks.

The current 'stock check' procedure

Work on the 'stock check' began in March 2006 and was completed in August, although analysing and acting on the findings took longer. A total of 13 staff were involved, each devoting as much time to the project as their jobs and schedules allowed. Edited sections of the master e-journal spreadsheet were e-mailed to each person, grouped by provider or publisher. Additional information provided included ISSN, holdings information, URL and password information. A checklist was also sent to each person detailing the procedure for the stock check. This was used to check against the SFX-generated A-Z web pages:

- Can the journal be found on the list?
- Does the 'Available from' information in the SFX window match the information in the

holdings column of the spreadsheet (year only)?

- If multiple providers are listed on the spreadsheet, are these also listed in the SFX window?
- Is the holdings information for any multiple providers correct?
- Does the SFX link take you to the journal? If there are multiple providers, check each provider link.
- Check that we have access to those years in the 'Available from' information by downloading a full text article from the earliest and the most recent year.
- Is the password/access info listed in the SFX window? Is the terminology correct, e.g. King's instead of KCL? King's Athens instead of Athens?
- Any other problems/comments?

Findings

As the results came in, the importance of the project became very apparent. Somewhat alarmingly, around 40% of titles that were checked were flagged up as problems. On further analysis many of these 'problems' were easy to solve and did not greatly affect the user experience. Part of the purpose of the project was to improve our own administration by highlighting discrepancies in our record keeping. We also wanted to ensure that information on each title was clear and intuitive for the user; terminology used in the e-journals list should be useful and correct, and the layout of results must be helpful to users. For example, a title that is included in a back-file but to which we also have a current subscription, should only be listed once. Before the stock check, such titles were often displayed as multiple records, separating the back-file from the current content. Other titles had duplicate entries due to their inclusion in more than one collection from a particular provider such as JSTOR. This resulted in a complex and confusing layout for users. Information regarding access and authentication also needed clarifying in many cases. Once identified, these were relatively simple issues to resolve, if a little time-consuming. However, some more serious issues were also raised.

The most common problem related to holdings information, with discrepancies found between the holdings information recorded on our master spreadsheet and that listed on our A-Z web pages – neither of which necessarily reflected true

holdings. Whilst the discrepancies were relatively small, such inaccurate information is unhelpful to our users and reflects badly on the service we provide. Considerable time was spent establishing the correct information and amending records. Happily, in most cases we had access to more content than we thought – additional content, such as back-issues, having been made available by the publisher but not communicated to us. Conversely, other titles had less content available. Although in most cases this amounted to a difference of just one or two years, questions were raised about why these discrepancies existed: was incorrect information provided by the publisher at the start of the subscription? Were changes in the subscription not communicated effectively? Or were our administrative practices not rigorous enough?

A number of problems featured back-file content. There were cases where a publisher provided 'free' online access to newly released back-file content, but at a later date began charging for the content and therefore removed our access, usually without any prior warning. As a result, wildly inaccurate information was being provided to the user. Some of our subscribed titles had been updated automatically by SFX with back-file holdings information, even though we had not paid for this additional content, and therefore had no entitlement to access. This is an area that is now improving, with SFX providing more flexibility by offering 'targets' for both back-file content and current content as well as a target that includes all the content. Nevertheless, considerable time had to be spent double-checking our entitlements and amending the public e-journals listing to reflect our true holdings.

A significant number of titles had lost online access, either to all content or to the current year. Given that the stock check took place several months into 2006, it was surprising that these problems had not been noticed earlier in the year, particularly by users. This raised questions about whether these e-journals were being used at all and if so, why such loss of service was not being communicated to e-journals staff. Are users not inclined to report problems or is contact information not easily accessible? In most of these cases, the root of the problem was publisher error, as our subscriptions were up to date. A number of titles had changed subscription model, therefore affecting access entitlement, again without this information having been communicated to us.

Other less common problems included broken links (due to publisher changes, cessation of titles and occasionally error on our part), titles that were not listed at all (mainly an SFX issue) or titles that were not displayed correctly. All were fairly simple issues to resolve.

Although the main aim of the project was to ensure the accessibility of our e-journals, other areas for thought were also highlighted, such as the effectiveness of communication between publishers, subscription agents, SFX and e-journals staff. The situation is improving but gaps clearly still exist. The stock check helped emphasize the importance of establishing good local procedures such as running the regular updates of the SFX KB. Changes in publisher holdings are not reflected in the public e-journals list unless this is done. So, for one particular provider, our access to all titles was increased by five years, but this was not indicated to users for some months due to delays in updating the KB. The rapidly changing and still somewhat unstable nature of the e-journal world was confirmed, stressing the need for rigorous procedures and regular checks of this kind. Having addressed a large number of problems during this first check, future accessibility checks should hopefully produce far fewer negative results and will therefore be much less time-consuming.

Current related projects

Having established the e-journal accessibility check, we are undertaking two other important e-journal projects: 1) importing our e-journals from SFX into the OPAC, and 2) conducting a licence audit. Although the export/import process should be simple, we have found it to be far from that,

as ensuring clarity in the OPAC display requires deletion and copying of MARC fields. The licence audit, conducted by colleagues in the eResources team, will result in the production of a database containing useful information that will help JDD staff e.g. checking if document delivery can be provided for any e-journal requests. The expectation is that having such information readily to hand will lead to a change in policy, i.e. supplying items rather than a blanket refusal.

In collaboration with colleagues, over the course of the 2006-07 academic year, we will also be looking at Electronic Resource Management Systems (ERMS). However, we would not necessarily expect that an ERMS will obviate the need to continue with our e-journal 'stock check'.

Article © Stephen Prowse & Catrin Sly

■ **Stephen Prowse**
Journals/Document Delivery Co-ordinator
Information Services Centre
New Hunt's House
King's College London
Guy's Campus
London SE1 1UL, UK
Tel: +44 (0)20 7848 6767
E-mail: stephen.prowse@kcl.ac.uk

■ **Catrin Sly**
Electronic Journals Senior Information Assistant
Maughan Library and Information Services Centre
King's College London
Chancery Lane
London WC2A 1LR, UK
Tel: +44 (0)20 7848 1256
E-mail: catrin.sly@kcl.ac.uk

To view the original copy of this article, published in *Serials*, the journal of the UKSG, click here:

<http://serials.uksg.org/openurl.asp?genre=article&issn=0953-0460&volume=20&issue=1&spage=54>

For a link to the table of contents for the issue of *Serials* in which this article first appeared, click here:

<http://serials.uksg.org/openurl.asp?genre=issue&issn=0953-0460&volume=20&issue=1>