

On the road with electronic resources: creating community through the ER&L Forums

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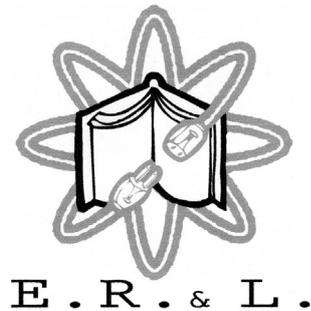
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After the second annual Electronic Resources & Libraries (ER&L) Conference, some of the participating members of this group were approached about taking the discussion of electronic resource management on the road. These discussions, which came to be known as the Electronic Resources & Libraries Forum, were held at three major library events last year. This article provides an overview of those discussions and the conclusions about how they will inform future ER&L conferences and events.

Although we have seen great improvement in the management of electronic resources in recent years, the complexities and dynamic nature of e-resource management leaves much to be explored. Based on sessions and conversations at the Electronic Resources & Libraries (ER&L) Conference in February 2007, the authors felt that information professionals still have a lot of work to do. The ER&L conferences allow for discussions about what needs to be done in order to improve the state of e-resource management across the profession. To determine what others believe to be the most pressing needs for us to address as a profession, we held a series of discussion forums at professional conferences throughout 2007. These ranged from small focus groups of 10–15 people to presentation-style discussions in a room holding over 100 people, but all with the goal of evaluating the current state of e-resource management from the perspectives of librarians, publishers and vendors, and determining what we might be able to do together to improve e-resource management.

The topics covered in the forums included managing, organizing and making accessible e-resources. We used these areas as springboards for facilitated discussions so that all the content was driven by the participants. Our conversations included authority control, standards, staffing, perceived and actual roles of vendors and librarians in managing resources, and thoughts on ways to improve access.

We held forums at three conferences after the ER&L Conference. They included the conferences of the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), North American Serials Interest Group (NASIG) and the UK Serials Group (UKSG). We also had a chance to discuss some of our findings at the American Library Association (ALA) Annual Conference. Forum attendees were mainly academic librarians, but also included systems vendors, publishers and subscription agents.

Overall, these sessions were very informative through participants' sharing of experiences concerning the current shape of e-resource management

in libraries. These discussions provided ideas for potential collaborative efforts and future ER&L conference topics and activities. This article is a summary of the forums and what we learned about the state of electronic resource management along with the standards, services and tools meant to make the management of e-resources easier. We will end with thoughts on what the next steps might be.

A group of about 50 primarily academic librarians and some representatives of systems vendors met in Baltimore during the ACRL Conference to discuss the current state of electronic resources and to consider how to bring together important concepts, tools and activities related to e-resource management into a set of best practices. Building on Serials Solutions' ERAMS concept, Jill Emery and Elizabeth Winter presented briefly on some 'big ideas' and important questions in e-resource management and the challenges we face as the profession struggles to comprehend the e-resources milieu in which we have found ourselves. The main ideas were the need for a common vocabulary and a well-connected community of people who deal with e-resources so that we can speak with coherence and unity amongst ourselves and with the publishers and vendors of the resources and systems we use.

After the brief presentation, participants then broke up into three groups for discussion and brainstorming. The three groups discussed managing, organizing, and making accessible, e-resources.

The group focusing on organizing e-resources talked about standards, authority control and vendors' responsibilities. The starting point for this group was an in-depth discussion about OCLC's attempt to build a single electronic resource knowledge base to which librarians could contribute and from which they could glean electronic resource management information. The most interesting comment from this discussion was a reminder that librarians had initially started along this road with the advent of JAKE, but that, in the end, our collaborative spirit had petered out and it ended up being one of the failed collaborative efforts to carry forth into the OpenURL realm. Key questions librarians should be asking are whether we really have the staff time to expend on creating another shared knowledge base of this sort and whether we are really committed to this level of collaboration.

From here, the discussion moved on to the problems associated with journals transferring from one platform to another or from one provider

to another. The major issues identified included: problem of titles changing from one provider to another, content and holdings being split between two providers/platforms, and content moving from platforms that are OpenURL compliant to ones that are not OpenURL compliant. Everyone at the table agreed that this was an ideal place for subscription agents to step in and work to create tools to enable librarians to keep up with these changes and bits of metadata. Despite members of the audience in general being part of the UKSG Transfer Project, this project in and of itself was not brought up for discussion, in part because the project was not as well known in the United States at the time.

This group also spent quite a bit of time discussing archiving initiatives and how best to manage back-files and older generation material. It was noted that at this time there really are not any digital preservation standards available for currently purchased electronic resources. Initiatives such as LOCKSS (Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe), CLOCKSS (Controlled LOCKSS) and Portico are beginnings, but libraries need to seriously consider future trends for the preservation of purchased electronic collections. It was also noted that we have been relying heavily on JSTOR to provide us with archival material and we want to start investigating other alternatives. It was suggested that consortia could play a vital role in this arena.

Then the group began a fairly intense discussion on standards and why librarians are slow adopters of new standards. Many felt it was due to lacking the technical savvy on how to best implement standards prior to our systems and software incorporating new standards into their platforms. A possible role for the ER&L Forum could be developing best practices documentation on a website in order to push harder for standards development when needed.

At the ACRL forum a group focused on issues of e-resource management such as staffing, work flow and systems. One of the primary challenges facing libraries regarding e-resource management is finding the right people to do the right work, at the right time, in the right way (or at least finding competent people to do helpful work, in a timely fashion, in a logical way). After expressing various degrees of frustration at the difficulty most libraries seem to have with staffing for electronic resource management, the group shared ideas on which skills staff should have in order to succeed

when working with e-resources. Most desirable were flexibility, adaptability and basic computing competence, along with an aptitude for learning new technologies. Participants wanted their staff to be able to:

- navigate with ease in the online environment
- manage multiple windows simultaneously
- identify data pertinent to the task at hand
- easily manipulate data and move it from one place to another
- learn new computer skills and systems quickly.

Some suggested – and at least one institution has already implemented – mandatory, annual technology skills testing and training for library staff. Creating a set of mandatory competencies and making them a part of annual performance reviews, albeit a time-intensive and potentially controversial undertaking, seems to be one way to achieve a measure of technological ability among staff.

Related to staffing and work flow was the issue of how to organize personnel and work flow for e-resources. Should there be separate departments or units within a library for print and electronic materials? Some definitely thought this might be a solution to complicated work flows and training hurdles that seem to be affecting many organizations. One institution, Northeastern University, had made a good deal of progress in this direction, reorganizing their technical services personnel into print management and non-print management areas. This had been a major reorganization effort which had included a detailed work flow analysis, the rewriting of a number of job descriptions, and a great deal of training, but the initial feedback was that the reorganization was working well. The idea was popular among the focus group members and definitely warrants further discussion.

Another major challenge identified was the perennial issue of limited time and resources. As more e-resource management responsibilities and tools are added, which responsibilities are we giving up? What should we stop doing? The suggestions here, which will not come as a surprise to most readers, were to stop checking in and claiming print serials. There was some debate over whether we should consider ceasing to check in and claim *all* print serials, or just those without an electronic component. This topic quickly reached its logical conclusion, which is that this type of decision will depend on the staffing situations, policies and missions of individual libraries.

Also discussed were the myriad systems that librarians use for the management of electronic materials. How do we deal with having many types of e-resource metadata distributed throughout ILSs, ERM systems, subscription vendor systems (such as EBSCONET and SwetsWise), publisher websites and hosting platforms, spreadsheets, and the like? Participants suggested that we either need a single type of system that can aggregate all this data (and it was generally agreed that ERM systems in their current state are not yet meeting this need) or a way for a variety of systems to interface with each other seamlessly. There was mention of standards in development to this end.

The third group discussed their desires for improving access to electronic resources. The discussion began with talk of a single search box with options for advanced searches that allowed for cross-searching of all electronic resources. Our current metasearch tools are not sufficiently good at this yet. The discussion moved to a desire for a more intelligent agent system with the capacity to analyze the user's request and understand their research level and their information needs. This would be embedded where users need it, such as in an academic course management environment and would return results, both paid and free, in one interface.

Like other groups, conversations flowed between the systems and products we use, the importance of standards, and where librarians fit. A few unanswered questions were posed, such as how librarian roles will change in an environment where search is almost seamless and how we will brand the content we make accessible if we streamline authentication and access. The group also touched on the need for consistent use of metadata standards that all providers use to improve the idea of a single interface. The ideal metadata would be modular and able to hook into a variety of systems including RSS feeds and course management data.

There seemed to be a general consensus among all three groups that standards are not moving fast enough to deal with the complexity of the e-resource management environment, and that there is not currently enough leadership in the field of electronic resources. This consensus lent support to the idea that it might be useful to have further ER&L Forums at future upcoming conferences and events, and also to develop a shared web space where we could post best practices for e-resource management.

At the UKSG meeting, the discussion overview presented at ACRL was repeated by Jill Emery, with Dana Walker sitting in to help further the discussion. Unfortunately, participation was minimal, which made the discussion more of a presentation by Jill and Dana. Since there was better knowledge of initiatives such as the UKSG Transfer Project, the discussion evolved more into what else was missing that could be provided by vendors and publishers. A member of the publishing community found this discussion to be very worthwhile and was interested to hear more from practicing librarians about what could be provided via their administrative sites to help provide more consistent administrative metadata. Some of the items identified here were:

- yearly or biannual title updates
- updates of holding information when back-files are added
- a list of titles that would be moving from the platform or provider
- a recognized place to change or edit IP ranges
- persistent URLs
- acknowledgement of OpenURL compliancy
- acknowledgement of known problems with metasearch tools
- checks on access, making sure availability of content was seen as something beyond the scope of most institutions (due to the amount of work still in place regarding print material).

The discussion wrapped up with the hope that new developments such as the UKSG Transfer Project, the ongoing institutional registry projects being undertaken by both Ringgold and OCLC, and the further developments of Editeur's & NISO's support of Serials Online Holdings would help make electronic resource management easier in the near future.

An ER&L Forum was held during the 2007 NASIG Conference in Louisville, Kentucky. Originally submitted as a request for a small user-group meeting, the NASIG planning committee recommended we expand the discussion to include all NASIG participants. A no-conflict meeting time was assigned and a standing-room-only crowd of over 100 gathered for a lively discussion. Participants included librarians and various members of the library vendor community including representatives from periodical subscription agents, book vendors and ILS system vendors.

Jill Emery and Dana Walker led an hour-long discussion of various issues and concerns regarding the management of electronic resources. Key issues discussed included ERM implementation, work flow planning, staffing for electronic resource management and standards for electronic resource data management.

Participants expressed the need for an ERM implementation and work flow planning web space, an online community where librarians could share ERM implementation experiences and issues. The need to share information is an inevitable result of the perceived absence of best practice guidance for ERM implementation planning, data preparation standards, established implementation logistics and staff training. ER&L will be providing additional space at <http://www.electroniclibrarian.org/forum> for librarians to establish contacts and exchange information. Specific issues raised include: interpreting license data for conversion into ERM systems; managing coverage loads; lack of data standards for e-resource metadata; and redundant and overlapping sources of e-resource metadata.

There was much discussion regarding the quality of knowledge base data. Many expressed dissatisfaction with the timeliness of updates and the accuracy of data within commercial knowledge bases. Ideas about a shared universal knowledge base were presented. Could there be a non-proprietary master knowledge base? If so, who would maintain this repository of data? Would there be a fee for such a service? Could periodical subscription agents, who already maintain current up-to-date title databases, serve a role in improving the quality and accuracy of data in commercial knowledge bases? Would libraries be willing to pay for this additional service?

There was extensive discussion regarding difficulties in implementing ERM systems in libraries. Many institutions have purchased ERM systems yet few have successfully implemented and populated them. Participants would like to see ERM vendors supply an optional default setup so initial implementation could be simplified and streamlined. There was a suggestion that pricing models be modified so that libraries could pay one price for an initial load and additional charges for ongoing maintenance costs. One ILS representative suggested that librarians ask publishers to develop and provide standard machine-readable license terms that could be loaded into ERM systems.

There was general agreement that publishers need to do more to standardize license and holdings data in machine-readable formats.

Considerable discussion took place regarding how libraries should manage staffing for e-resources. Libraries continue to spend more on e-resources yet staffing levels are still predominantly focused on print materials. If 60-70% of material budgets are spent on e-resources but only 20-30% of staff is assigned to manage e-resources, there is a disparity in allocating staff resources. Typically, managing e-resources requires higher-level staff than managing print materials. Participants commented that training staff to manage e-resources is very labour intensive and there is a lack of trained support staff to help with e-resource management. There was discussion regarding what is the appropriate staff classification for ERM and SFX management. Individuals reported that at their library they have changed the infrastructure to blend e-resource cataloging and acquisitions; others have developed e-resource pilot teams for initial work flow development and then brought in staff from other teams to expand the team.

Jill posed a question to forum attendees: What is holding us back from driving the ERM market? We created home grown systems and stopped when vendors started creating ERM systems. Responses included: the biggest problem is coverage loads; we can't get standardized data from publishers or aggregators; and lack of understanding of the

local work flow in libraries on the part of ERM vendors.

A final comment from a NASIG board member suggested that NASIG could potentially provide continuing education regional workshops for ERM implementation planning and help establish a list of best practices for ERM implementation and management.

Overall, we felt we achieved our objectives of getting a sense of the current state of electronic resource management in libraries. We gained an understanding of what is most important to librarians who work with e-resources and what their needs are as we all deal with the vast numbers of e-resources to which we now have access.

We learned that there still are lots of problems, but that we are generally struggling with the same things. Within individual libraries, we are struggling to manage appropriate personnel and determine the best work flows. Outside the individual institutions, more standardization of metadata will be necessary to move forward more quickly and better management of electronic resources will require major collaboration between librarians, agents, publisher and vendors.

We are planning to conduct a few more forums this year and speak more fully about where we should go from here at the Electronic Resources & Libraries Conference in March, 2008. We currently host a blog, called ER&L Forum, and hope to expand that with best practices on electronic



*The authors planning
an ER&L Forum*

resources management and include features to allow participants to share and shape the content. We hope to create a participatory environment to help and educate each other and move standards and processes along for us all.

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