Pay-per-view article access: a viable replacement for subscriptions?

As journal prices continue to rise and library budgets barely keep pace with inflation, librarians must find creative ways to remain good stewards of their budgets while still providing their users with high-quality content. This case-study examines how one small university library took the step of cancelling their subscriptions to the journals they obtained from a single publisher, reallocating those monies to that publisher's pay-per-view plan. It explores the rationale behind the project, the simple steps taken to implement it, and the initial reaction of the university faculty. Although it is too soon to declare the project an unqualified success and there are still some areas of concern, early trends are promising.

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Introduction

As journal prices continue to rise and library budgets continue to fall behind, librarians must find creative ways to remain good stewards of their budgets while still providing their users with high-quality content. In 2007, the library faculty at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, took the step of cancelling all their subscriptions to journals published by a single publisher. They then used some of the monies that would have been applied to those subscriptions to establish a deposit account with that publisher to pay for single article downloads.

Throughout the literature, a number of different terms are used to refer to end-users requesting articles directly and paying by the article: unmediated document delivery[1] or unmediated document ordering[2], user initiated document delivery[3], the 'just-in-time model'[4], end-user document supply[5], articles on demand[6], and pay-per-view (PPV)[7]. Beginning in the 1990s, libraries began to experiment with PPV as an alternative to traditional forms of inter-library loan (ILL). In part this was a response to the problem of rising serial prices[8] and the resulting tension between the need to cancel journal subscriptions while still providing access to needed items[9]; as Haslam and Stowers point out, "In an era of highly inflationary serials, [a] benefit of unmediated document delivery is that it can soften the blow of journal cancellations by streamlining the process of obtaining articles."[10] Another major consideration was the need to meet user expectations heightened by experience with improved technology and services that provided them with options for document delivery other than visiting the library[11], while a third consideration was the cost of staffing for traditional ILL[12].

On the whole, librarians reported positive experiences with these projects. Users were generally pleased with the improved access to titles and the modes of delivery, and it was generally deemed a cost-effective alternative to traditional modes of document delivery. A few cautionary notes were sounded, but even these were largely tempered with optimism[13].

In recent years there has been a dearth of articles about similar projects. Perhaps this decline in the number of publications on this topic may be attributed to a reluctance to publish 'more of the same', although it is in large part due to the cessation of some of the operations for document supply (e.g., the closure of EBSCOdoc in 1998) coupled with the rise of aggregated collections of e-journals as well as publishers' focus on big deals. In addition, consortia agreements have provided broader access to lesser-used materials that would otherwise have been obtainable via document delivery. All of these have provided libraries with expanded access to titles they may not have subscribed to in a print-only world.

The option of per-article purchase has never disappeared, however. Wiley InterScience has provided a per-article purchasing service with its article tokens, while CARL UnCover, an early player, was acquired by Ingenta, which integrated the two services and continued to provide articles for individual purchase. The circumstances that brought about the first experiments in electronic document delivery are still with us: ever-increasing user expectations, improvements in technology (e.g. Google) that challenge the place of the library, and annual increases in serials costs coupled with flat or decreasing library budgets. As a result, libraries are once again investigating the option of purchasing at the article level rather than just at the level of the journal subscription.

Background

Trinity University is a private institution with an enrollment of around 2,500 students, 245 faculty, and a primarily undergraduate liberal arts curriculum as well as professional programs in business and engineering. It also offers master's-level programs in health care administration, accounting and several areas of education. For most departments the journal literature forms a very important part of their library resources, and any efforts to cancel subscriptions are met with resistance or quiet despair.

It is not unusual for university libraries to go through a journal cancellation process on an annual basis. Budgets tend to be flat or increase only a few percentage points from year to year, whereas journal price increases are 5% on the low end and usually more. This is the situation that Trinity University has also faced in many of the past 20 years.

To cut, or not to cut

At Trinity, the spring of 2006 promised a materials budget increase of 2% for Fiscal Year 06/07, with an anticipated increase in the cost of print subscriptions of 8% and a likely budget shortfall of c$50,000. The librarians decided that it was time to stop the 'cancellations as usual' procedure and try something that dealt with the root of the problem. A close examination of Trinity's print serials budget revealed that 4% of the subscriptions came from one publisher, whereas expenditures for the publisher accounted for 19% of that budget. While this pattern could be attributed to a number of different publishers in other libraries, for the Trinity library it was Elsevier that made it difficult to maintain our subscription level.

Three factors influenced our strong desire to try a different path. An involved Library Activities Committee, consisting of faculty members from across the curriculum, had asked the librarians to find a new solution to the annual cuts and cancellations. Individual professors were uniformly unhappy with the process; one scientist sadly noted that his department was required to continue to die the death of a million cuts. Finally, we were encountering more concerns from faculty who needed desktop access to the original color in Elsevier journals. Most articles in titles to which we did not subscribe were supplied via inter-library loan in black and white or with lower resolution color than was useful.

To deal with the budget challenge, we tried to negotiate a subscription to one or more of the Elsevier College Editions Collections. However, Trinity did not fit all of the criteria. While we only teach up to a master's level, our faculty are heavily involved with research, which disallowed our subscription to any of these collections. Ultimately, we decided to cancel all Elsevier subscriptions for 2007 and set up a pay-per-view ScienceDirect account. The library would allow faculty to order any articles they wanted, with our budget covering the $30/article charge.

Gaining support

Titles of interest to seven departments accounted for most of the subscriptions to the Elsevier journals. In an effort to gain support for the relatively radical decision to cancel all titles, we identified a small focus group consisting of one faculty member from each of those departments. We presented the idea to them during the fall of 2006, asking for input and providing them with unlimited access for three months to search and download articles from ScienceDirect. Because we were still working out the details of a pay-per-view program and hoped to avoid being bombarded with questions from the faculty at large, we asked focus group members not to share their experience widely with colleagues, although selective sharing was not discouraged.

Our selling points for the focus group, and later for the faculty as a whole, seemed quite persuasive. We anticipated savings that could eliminate other journal cancellations for a number of years. Faculty would gain immediate access to all of the Elsevier journals. They would have greater control of the process by being able to order articles themselves and have direct delivery to their desktops. They would also have access to high resolution color in the articles, an increasingly important factor in a number of disciplines.

Implementation of pay-per-view

Decisions had to be made related to campus access to the journals. In terms of 'how', we added all of the ScienceDirect titles to our A-Z listing of journals. These titles were linked to an intermediate web page that briefly explained and provided links to the options for accessing an article: print for the pre-2006 volumes of titles to which we had formerly subscribed, inter-library loan or pay-per-view. The 'who' was a bigger question; what should we do for the students, whose knowledge of specific journals is usually limited and whose standards for selecting an article from a database are often set more by instant availability than by potential usefulness? We eventually determined that faculty would have unlimited access to Elsevier journals, but students would have to request electronic articles from the librarians at the Help Desk, or from a faculty member with whom they were working.

Entering unknown territory, we estimated possible demand and prepaid a lump sum with no expiration date. We were interested in tracking the ScienceDirect usage in some detail, so we set up usernames and passwords for each academic department and for the library. An initial internal budget was established, with more funds set aside for those departments connected with greater numbers of Elsevier titles to which we had subscribed. We also established procedures for contacting the publisher for a pro forma invoice whenever our deposit account required replenishment. We set up spreadsheets to track charges by department and usage by title. Both expenditures and usage statistics are very well documented by Elsevier's administrative website and monthly invoices.

The results

An announcement of the new service was e-mailed to the faculty in early January 2007. With the exception of one department, faculty members were either delighted or disinterested. The dissenting department, despite having a representative in the focus group, was clearly put off by its lack of input on our decision to cancel subscriptions and go to PPV. Differing views on the library budget and who should be controlling it also entered into the discussion. We learned that greater involvement by more faculty earlier in the process might have made a positive difference in the program's acceptance, but our own planning and budgetary concerns could have been compromised.

On the positive side, the faculty members in neuroscience and the geosciences are thrilled with the color in the original PDFs. Easy access to many more journals has been appreciated. As colleagues in other libraries have also noted when they made ScienceDirect available to their campuses, the majority of the articles retrieved (76%) are from journals to which the Trinity library did not subscribe. The decision to buy an article is generally based on the abstract, leading one chemist to comment: "I was pleased with the access, although my Scotch soul feels funny spending $30 dollars when I don't know what I am getting." We appreciate this attitude, which also reinforces our decision to limit students to mediated access.

Our goal to protect the budget has certainly been achieved in the first year. Through December 2007 we paid for 221 articles, significantly less than we had anticipated. While we are pleased with the savings, they also raise an issue: on a campus where faculty members are too heavily involved in research for the library to qualify for the Elsevier College Editions Collections, why aren't they ordering more Elsevier articles? There are a number of possible answers: they have learned that inter-library loan is very fast and may satisfy most of their time constraints, it is inconvenient to remember usernames and passwords for the PPV account, and for those "Scotch souls" it may be hard to justify $30 for an article that could be obtained for free (or at least without charges visible to the end-user) through other channels. All of these factors discourage use.

The other major factor in our usage is the limited student access. By telling students that they must request an article from a librarian, we have the opportunity not only to place an order but also to suggest ILL as a very viable alternative to PPV, to guide students to other, already available articles that would be just as satisfactory, and generally to serve in our educational role as reference librarians. These are what might be considered positive aspects of mediated access. However, the major negative result is that most undergraduate students will not ask for help; if an article is not available in full text on their desktops, they will look for something else. Thus student access is still an area of concern.

Conclusion

With only a year of experience in a pay-per-view environment, it is premature to say that this is a huge success or that it has major flaws. At the moment, we have achieved our goal of cutting costs while still providing a high level of access to materials for faculty, and PPV has become just one more means of access for our users. The issue of access versus ownership, while not addressed in this paper, is an ongoing concern when subscriptions are dropped. Moreover, it remains to be seen how this publisher and others will respond to increased usage of the PPV option. "…[Publishers] do have a dilemma – price too cheaply and it erodes the attractiveness of Big Deals and indeed individual subscriptions but price too high and nobody will use the service."[14] That said, the number of publishers offering PPV articles has increased in recent years, with large publishers seeing it as a significant source of revenue.[15] Our experience reinforces the perspective of those librarians who would prefer databases of articles rather than greater numbers of journal subscriptions – a trend that could grow with continuing budget concerns and the enthusiastic embrace of electronic over print formats. For some situations and institutions, pay-per-view may be a viable means of providing access to content into the foreseeable future.

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