

## **INTERMEDIARIES AND ELECTRONIC INFORMATION - WHAT ROLE FOR THE SUBSCRIPTION AGENT?\***

**By Albert Prior**

In the past the subscription agent's role has been based fundamentally on providing services to libraries in the acquisition and management of print journals. Agents are in the business of offering added value. With some exceptions, they are not owners of content. They exist to make things easier for their customers by acting as a link between publishers and libraries in the supply of subscriptions. Libraries use agents as a single source for ordering, paying, dealing with missing and damages issues, delivering journals and the agents have built up a wide range of additional services to support the core subscription service.

Global purchasing of print journals is large. The value of institutional journal subscriptions world-wide is in the region of \$2500 million. This is predominantly institutional buying by academic and research libraries, the main customers of subscription agents.

### **Who are the agents?**

The Association of Subscription Agents, which is UK based, but an international body, has some 32 members. Many of these however, provide a service only within their own countries or regions. The four major international subscription agents: Blackwell , Dawson/Faxon , Ebsco provide a global service, from offices in various countries and are generally significantly larger than the other agents.

Agents have been active in developing additional support services, over and above the core function of processing and maintaining annual subscriptions to journals. These include a wide range of information, invoicing and financial services as well as systems to improve the overall efficiency of their operations, along with online links to their databases, serials management software and specialist services for CD ROM titles, the first 'electronic' publications handled by agents.

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## **The growth of electronic journals**

Over the last two years electronic journal have moved from being experiments, with the launch by commercial publishers of electronic versions of existing commercial print titles. 'Electronic only' journals have had relatively little impact on subscription agents or library purchasing, generally being either free or directed at a very limited user groups.

## **How many electronic journals are there?**

In late 1996 the Association of Research Libraries in the USA published the 6th edition of The Directory of Electronic Journals, Newsletters and Academic Discussion Lists, the main reference work for serials available via the Internet. The Directory is a compilation of entries for over 3000 academic and professional discussion lists and 1688 electronic journals, newsletters and newsletter-digests - representing a 257% increase in journals and a 26% increase in lists since the 1995 edition.

## **Electronic journals - impact on agents' customers:**

Whilst electronic journals offer benefits for users, they have also resulted in administrative difficulties and challenges for libraries: dealing with each individual publisher to set up electronic access arrangements on behalf of users, to obtain passwords, to handle registration and license arrangements etc. Libraries are now looking for services to streamline and simplify access to electronic journals: single points for ordering, access, information and payment - intermediaries who can offer a comprehensive support service.

## **Electronic journals - features:**

Electronic journals also bring with them fundamentally different features or characteristics. For example, whilst no 'learning' is needed for users to handle print titles, electronic journals need some degree of training, equipment and some support. Publishers also exert more control over the use of electronic serials, compared with print, as they are rightly concerned about possibilities of security and unauthorised use of their data over networks or the Internet. Furthermore, in subscribing to electronic journals, the question arises as to whether a library is actually purchasing the journal or simply acquiring temporary access rights. New pricing models have also started to emerge for accessing electronic titles, including consortium based licensing

### **Agent's role in e-journals:**

Recently, agents have been developing major new services to address these issues - 'one stop shopping' or 'single sources' to provide access and ordering of Internet based serials. A broad range of functions have been built into these services with the aim of offering a simplified approach for libraries and users, including: single points of access and search engines for accessing a range of titles from multiple publishers; search and browsing options; simplified password administration; library management functions, usage data and email alerting services

### **How these services will develop:**

Agents' full text journals services are only now being launched by the major subscription agents, including Electronic Journal Navigator from Blackwell, SwetsNet from Swets, Information Quest from Dawson, whilst Ebsco has Ebscohost. They will continue to be developed both in content and functions. Increasing numbers of serials titles will of course be added as agreements are reached with individual publishers and as more content becomes available electronically from individual publishers. Services with only a few hundred titles at present, will become much more significant when they are offering many thousands of electronic journals.

They will increasingly link to secondary information databases, to offer end users seamless access to full texts from a range of resource discovery tools. Agents will also explore ways in which they can provide links between the articles and citations of the titles offered in their services. They will also define their position more clearly regarding longer term archiving, and access to, the growing volume of electronic serials information

### **New economics - site licensing:**

Most publishers are currently offering electronic journals on an annual subscription basis, often by way of a combined print and electronic price. The surcharge to acquire access to the electronic version can range between zero and 40 percent or so, but more common is a level of 10-15%.

A small but growing number of publishers are now offering electronic access to their products and titles by way of consortium based site licenses, or licenses for individual institutions. Under the terms of such licenses, authorised members of the institutions are often able to make unlimited local use of the electronic information, including for example the creation of electronic course packs, short loan reserve collections etc. As the numbers of these agreements grow, libraries

will increasingly be looking to subscription agents or other intermediaries to help in the administration and management, and possibly the negotiation, of these licenses. For example, agents will maintain up-to-date databases of publishers' options and prices; they will act as a liaison point for changes to the agreements (new titles, different members etc); they will make available individual publishers' license and handle renewals and electronic access arrangements.

Publishers can similarly benefit from shifting some of the routine administrative work of licensing to agents, in particular those tasks involved in direct communications with libraries and the consortia.

### **Transactional pricing**

Agents will also increasingly offer pay-per-view or transactional pricing at the article level, depending on arrangements negotiated with individual publishers. These options will be offered within the new electronic journals services they are developing. Users will be able to view and print individual articles on payment to the agent of an article fee, either by way of a deposit account, invoicing or credit card in due course. Publishers will set their own article prices, with agents adding their handling charges for the transaction. Such pay-per-view services will be increasingly possible, as growing numbers of publishers make their data available electronically. A number of publishers see this as an opportunity to offer electronic access to new markets, e.g. for those institutions which need only occasional articles from specific journals rather than annual subscriptions, whilst others have some concern about the possible impact on subscription levels.

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