

FULL TEXT SERVICES: THE VIEW OF A PUBLISHER

Leo Walford

Paper presented at the ASA seminar 'The Internet: opportunities for agents and publishers', London, February 1998

This paper brings to the discussion on full-text electronic journal services the perspective of a social sciences journal publisher. Many of the issues are the same as for STM publishers, but there are also a number that are different, and a few of these will be highlighted.



Leo Walford is Commissioning Editor, Sage Publications, 6 Bonhill St, London EC2A 4PU

Introduction

The reasons for delivering journal material over the web, and the advantages and disadvantages of so doing have been discussed elsewhere, and these are largely the same as for STM publishing. I therefore want to start my presentation with a look at where the demand for electronic journals is coming from in a social sciences environment, before considering the factors involved in deciding how to undertake electronic journals delivery, and a couple of the major issues that these factors raise.

Demand

Social science publishers do not appear to be under the same pressure to publish electronically from their constituencies as the STM publishers. This is not just because of the importance of speed and primacy of results, but is perhaps more because of the discursive nature of the material, where argument and sustained discussion is more significant than numerical results. However, there is demand, and it is growing. It comes from the following sources:

Journal editors and Societies

Demand is very variable, with some as keen as mustard, others uninterested or even reluctant.

Authors

Demand from authors is much more related to their understandable wishes to have their material available electronically. Without providing some means for an author's material to be available electronically, a publisher is in a weak position in trying to deny authors the right to make their material available electronically themselves.

End-users

Demand from individual end-users is small, though increasing.

Librarians

Like end-users, demand from librarians is increasing. The emergence of consortia means that this demand is likely to increase dramatically, and in nice handy chunks.

Intermediaries

By far the strongest demand on publishers to develop electronic journal services is coming from the intermediaries.

Use of intermediaries

Having established that demand for electronic journals is emerging and that there are good reasons for responding to that demand, the next decision for a publisher is how to go about it, and, in particular, whether to go it alone or via one or more intermediaries. This decision hinges on a number of factors, including:

Expertise

While a publisher could muster the expertise and equipment to organise storage, delivery, cataloguing, archiving and keeping up-to-date with developments in storage technologies, searching, etc., the publisher's expertise really lies in the editorial development and marketing of journals and books.

Revenue expectations

There is scant evidence of significant revenue streams coming from electronic journals so far, at least in the social sciences. It, therefore, seems right to follow a model that minimises financial risk.

Critical mass

The third, and most important point, is the question of critical mass of material - enabling academics to search across a range of journals and publishers. Experience, e.g. that of the TULIP experiment run by Elsevier, or the earlier days of ADONIS has shown that even for publishers/ services with a heavy concentration of material in a particular discipline, users are more concerned

to have access to the right journals than to have access to a large number of journals.

These three factors argue in favour of the route of using one or more intermediaries to store and disseminate journal material electronically, rather than going it alone.

Choice of intermediaries

Having made the decision to use intermediaries, there are a number of factors which should be taken into account in selecting intermediaries. These include:

Market/geographical spread

It is important to choose intermediaries whose customer-base matches all (or part) of that of the publisher. In practical terms, of course, this almost certainly means more than one intermediary.

Journal coverage

The other journals hosted on an intermediary's system are also a factor in the choice of one or more intermediary. Of course, the coverage offered by intermediaries is expanding daily, and links to allow searching across intermediaries are likely to appear at some point in the future, so this may prove to be more of a short-term reason than one of long-term importance.

Flexibility

It is important to choose intermediaries prepared to be flexible in their dealings with the publisher and open to the publisher's publishing models and approach. Publishers have not traditionally wished to control the routes by which customers acquire or access their material, or to limit those routes. It is very important, therefore, to consider intermediaries that are willing to co-operate with other intermediaries and subscription agents, and to be wary of any that might seek an exclusive arrangement, if only because of the market/geographical spread.

Commonality/standards

At least in the social sciences the print journal is, and is likely to remain for a while, the primary commodity. Currently, the electronic journal is expected to mirror the print version. For such a model, SGML headers and PDFs of full-text provide an obvious, straightforward and widely

adopted solution. Of course, for a different model, such as electronic-only publication, or one where the electronic portion is the primary commodity, different solutions would apply. While recognising that in technological terms SGML/PDF is not necessarily the optimal solution, from a cultural point of view it does represent the obvious route, and one that I would expect and require an intermediary to be comfortable with.

Charging model and price

It would be misleading to pretend that the charging model and price charged by intermediaries is not a factor, particularly in the case of social sciences journals. This is worth going into, as there are a number of important points to be taken into account here.

From a publisher's perspective, there are two basic models for pricing that intermediaries are offering:

- A the service is free to the publisher, end-users are charged the real cost of accessing the material
- B the publisher pays for the service, and end-users either pay a lower charge or do not pay the access costs

While there are benefits and disadvantages to both these models, there is also an interesting point which is worth elaborating.

In cases where intermediaries overlap in the territories and customers they serve - which effectively means everywhere - there is a central problem for a publisher signing up with intermediaries operating both charging models.

This is best illustrated by hypothetical example in Table 1, which ignores VAT, assumes 5% agent's discount on both paper and electronic and a price for electronic plus print of 120% of print only.

Model B will yield less revenue per subscription to the publisher than a similar subscription through an intermediary operating charging model A.

It is hardly possible to remedy this by the publisher setting different subscription rates according to which intermediary is used, and just increasing the subscription price across the board to cover this would penalise the majority of customers who have yet to express an interest in on-line journal delivery.

Furthermore, it is likely that the overall price to the customer subscribing via model B is likely to be lower than that if the customer subscribed via an intermediary using model A. What this means is that a subscription through model B will not only yield less money to the publisher than the same subscription through model A, but is likely also to present a more attractive route for the customer.

As this illustrates, running these two models in parallel creates an uneven playing field for customers and publishers. Model B also effectively hides the true cost of electronic delivery from the customer, whereas model A makes it transparent.

Pricing to customers

There is a large variety of pricing models adopted by publishers, notably those in STM publishing who have led the way in on-line journal

publishing. Whatever model is chosen will obviously affect take-up of a service, and it is worth considering briefly those factors that are significant in the choice of approach a social science publisher might make.

There are significant extra costs involved in production of electronic journals. At least amongst the suppliers used by some social sciences publishers, familiarity with, and ability to provide SGML headers and PDFs are not universal. Moreover, work is still needed at the publisher's

	<i>Model A</i>	<i>Model B</i>
Subscription list price	£100*	£100*
Electronic access fee	£20	£20
Service fee to user	£X	£Y
Amount charged to customer	£120+X	£120+Y
Discount to intermediary	£1**	£1**
Cost of service to publisher	£0	£Z
Pub. receives for paper sub	£95	£95
Pub. receive for e-sub	£19	£19-Z
Total pub receives	£114	£114 - Z
(Total intermediary receives	£6 + X	£6 + Y + Z)

Table 1. Intermediaries' charging models

end to store journal material, to check it and deliver it to an intermediary, or to maintain a link with the intermediary.

On the whole social sciences and humanities journals are significantly cheaper, and turn over significantly less revenue than the STM journals which have led the way in electronic journal delivery. Costs, which for an STM journal form a tiny addition to a production bill may have a much more significant impact of the margin of a small social sciences journal. Of course, this problem could be minimised by systems of discounting based on file sizes.

Social sciences publishers often have many personal subscribers, and these will form a significant part of the revenue stream for a journal. The impact of electronic journal subscriptions, site-licensed around campuses, on those subscriptions is unknown.

In a field where demand is only beginning to emerge, it seems unfair to burden all subscribers with the additional costs involved in making journals available electronically, and much more appropriate that these should be transparent, and

borne by the customers benefiting from the on-line journal's added benefits.

Conclusions

Demand for electronic journals is growing in the social sciences. At least for social science publishers, the route of using one or more intermediaries seems best and there are a number of factors important in selecting these. Not least of these is the charging mechanism, as this has major implications on the use of other intermediaries. Pricing to customers is a complex issue, but it seems clear that those customers not interested in electronic journals should not be burdened with the costs of them.

A final thought: electronic journal publishing has been around for a number of years, and each time it is revisited the costs of doing it go down and the rewards become more apparent and attainable. If this is a race, it is one in which the prizes go to those coming second and third rather than first.