

NESLI - THE NATIONAL ELECTRONIC SITE LICENCE INITIATIVE CREATING A BIT OF A DISTURBANCE

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NESLI is disturbing the status quo in scholarly publishing by negotiating at national level for the provision of e-journals to UK higher education institutions. Through these negotiations and value-added services, NESLI will promote co-ordinated access, delivery and management for electronic journals



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With acknowledgment to Paul Kobulnicky for alerting his audience to a fascinating book by Robert Jervis¹ in a recent presentation on the SPARC initiative (Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition)², this paper is sub-titled 'creating a bit of a disturbance'. The main theme of Jervis's book concerns complex systems such as ecological and political systems and the effects of change upon them. In it he says, "you cannot change a complex organism, you can only disturb it". When the scholarly publishing industry is considered in its totality - a complex organisation with a diversity of stakeholders and a turnover measured in billions - with its ongoing downward spiral of library journal cancellations followed by large subscription price rises, followed by more cancellations, followed by further price rises, it becomes apparent that change is not easy. So in this presentation the argument is advanced that although NESLI is not going to change the scholarly communication process on its own, overnight, it is one of a number of change agents currently at work in the process of disturbing the industry.

NESLI in context

It is important to recognise that NESLI is part of a bigger picture in the process of making available a wide range of electronic resources to UK higher education institutions. The Joint Information Services Committee (JISC) has created a Committee on Electronic Information (CEI). CEI, in its turn, has created the Content Working Group (CWG) to formulate and oversee JISC's Collection Policy.

"The CWG is charged to act as the focus for the CEI's objective to develop the distributed national electronic resource, as manifest through the acquisition, creation and access to information resources."

The Distributed National Electronic Resource (DNER) is intended to be of benefit to a very wide range of user

constituencies, have a broad perspective on materials selected and to develop in a coherent, unified way.³ NESLI forms one part of this strategy.

Background to NESLI

The key element in NESLI is the letter E. NESLI is concerned with access to, delivery of and management of *electronic* journals (e-journals). NESLI is *not* a successor to the Pilot Site Licence initiative (PSLI) - although that too was a JISC funded initiative. The difference is that the PSLI was only ever intended to run for three years for two participating publishers (Blackwells and the Institute of Physics Publishing) and four years for the third publisher (Academic Press). Moreover, the PSLI was "top-sliced" from UK university funds and therefore subsidised both publishers and libraries. NESLI is intended to be self-financing and has only received pump-priming money from JISC for a three year period. The JISC tender for the NESLI Managing Agent resulted in the appointment of a consortium - Swets and Zeitlinger and Manchester University Computing Service - to manage the initiative. Swets and Zeitlinger, as an international subscription agent, has extensive experience in the serials industry from both a library and publisher perspective and Manchester University Computing Service have considerable expertise in the storage and delivery of large scale datasets through their MIDAS service (Manchester Information Data Service) and in e-journals through their involvement with the Electronic Libraries Programme (eLib) SuperJournal Project.⁴ The Managing Agent began work on 1st May 1998.

NESLI and the Managing Agent are overseen by two main bodies - the Steering Committee appointed by JISC to which the Managing Agent reports, and an Advisory Group comprising representatives from the wider industry - publishers, subscription agents, other aggregators and librarians. An electronic discussion list (lis-nesli-reps) has been set up for the announcement of developments and new deals and to act as a discussion list for library representatives. The vast majority of UK higher education institutions (UK HEIs) have now nominated representatives to join the list. NESLI Web pages are updated on a regular basis to keep the wider community informed.

What's in it for libraries?

A central remit of the Managing Agent is to negotiate with publishers on behalf of all UK HEIs to get good deals on the provision of e-journals. Because the Managing Agent is negotiating on behalf of a *national consortium* it is hoped that hard bargaining will produce attractive offers to libraries from publishers. At such an early stage of the initiative it is not surprising that a wide range of different economic models and licence agreements are being put forward by publishers. As any librarian who has been involved in negotiating individual deals for e-journals with publishers will know, a variety of pricing mechanisms exist. Some publishers offer free access to the electronic versions of their journals combined with the print subscription (thus avoiding the payment of VAT), others offer the electronic version combined with the print subscription but charge an additional percentage payment. What is most noticeable about the majority of pricing policies is that very few publishers offer *electronic only* access - libraries are still expected to maintain print-based subscriptions with the 'added bonus' of electronic access. What NESLI hopes to do is to reverse this situation and enable libraries, if they so wish, to purchase electronic journals totally separate from print subscriptions - and, it is hoped, at a lower price than the print equivalent. Unbundling printed journals from e-journals is a major, long-term objective of NESLI. A further objective is to provide wider access to journal information by using the combined purchasing power of UK HEIs to offer access to all titles produced by a publisher to all national consortium members.

A major concern for those libraries currently offering access to e-journals is the complexity of access. The much hyped 'one-stop-shop' is not yet a reality and most libraries either provide links to individual publishers' Web pages (perhaps providing their own alphabetical and subject indexes) or utilise aggregator services such as Blackwells Electronic Journal Navigator, SwetsNet or Dawson's InfoQuest. The main drawback with current aggregator services is that they lack a critical mass of titles and the problems associated with passwords and IP addresses still remain, whichever access route is adopted. By virtue of national negotiation, NESLI hopes to bring

together, as quickly as possible, a critical mass of journals in a wide range of subject areas and make them available through one single, standardised interface (SwetsNet). Moreover, the Managing Agent is not just negotiating on price. An extremely important element of NESLI negotiation concerns licensing and participating publishers are being asked to accept a licence agreement based on the JISC/PA (Publishers Association) model licence which will free librarians from the highly time consuming task of negotiating individual licence agreements. A bonus if ever there was one!

A further advantage to libraries will be the collection of use data via NESLI. For many years the scholarly community has been divided about the actual level of use of journals. A use study undertaken at Loughborough University in the 1980's identified that during the course of one full academic year 47% of chemistry titles (current and back issues) were not consulted and 55% of economics titles were not consulted.⁵ However, publishers should take heart from the more recent use data published by Tenopir and King⁶ which claims, for example, that scientists at the University of Tennessee read an average of 188 scholarly articles per year and that, on average, a scientific journal gets over 100,000 article readings. For e-journals, these findings are substantiated by the findings of the SuperJournal project.⁷ Accurate use data from electronic access will support informed decisions about the cost-effectiveness of information sources.

What's in it for publishers?

Many of the advantages to libraries of national negotiation are replicated in the publishing industry. Publishers will be far less involved in individual library negotiation with the consequent saving of staff time and money. They will benefit from a high UK profile and the fact that licensing terms have been validated by the Publishers Association. Many of the contentious issues surrounding e-journal provision to libraries have been discussed and agreed at a national level including: use of electronic articles in course packs; electronic interlibrary loans; site definitions; and walk-in users and distance learners. Use data will also provide publishers with valuable marketing and management information and they can also be assured that data security is a high

priority for the service - utilising the national authentication system ATHENS.

What's in it for users?

Research by Tomney⁸ and Woodward⁹ demonstrates that users want:

- quick and easy access to as much quality information as possible - regardless of who publishes it;
- a critical mass of titles in their subject area;
- conformity of searching - not different Web sites with different search engines - however wonderfully designed they are!;
- as few 'brickwalls' as possible;
- hypertext links from articles to other relevant information sources;
- more information about which journals are available electronically.

The NESLI Steering Committee and Managing Agent are addressing, or intend in the future to address, all of these important issues. After all, a central objective of NESLI is to provide a service to libraries which is as cost-effective and comprehensive as possible so that they can offer a high quality e-journal service to their clients.

How much disturbance?

Earlier in this paper, reference was made to NESLI acting as one of a number of change agents which are beginning to disturb the status quo of the scholarly publishing industry. But NESLI is not the only initiative worldwide which is working to effect change. A number of new and exciting initiative and coalitions are working towards finding new ways of disseminating scholarly information in both the print and electronic environments. HighWire Press for example, is a not-for-profit outfit set up in 1995 by Stanford University Libraries and Academic Information Resources to help universities and societies to publish at low cost. HighWire now has more than 100 journals in its stable, including the *Journal of Biological Chemistry* - the world's most cited journal. By partnering with publishers, SPARC, set up in 1997 by the US Association of Research Libraries (ARL), aims to: create a more competitive marketplace; reduce prices of journals, and apply new technologies to improve the process of scholarly communication. SPARC is

underwriting the launch of journals aimed at competing head on with expensive titles from commercial publishers.

Anyone in doubt about the reality of change is recommended to read a recent article in *Nature* (not a library/ information science journal!) entitled "The writing is on the Web for science journals in print". In it Dobson¹⁰ says: "The Internet is blurring the traditional roles of creators, suppliers and distributors of scientific information, and injecting a long overdue element of competition. A shake-out of the entire scholarly publishing industry seems inevitable".

Progress to date

Setting up NESLI is proving to be very hard work. The Managing Agent is currently negotiating with hundreds of different publishers - from large multinationals to small learned societies. Complex negotiations take time and the end result - an offer to the community on lis-nesli-reps - is the result of many meetings with a publisher and subsequent discussion and evaluation of that offer by the Steering Committee, who make the final decision. Because of the wide variety of economic models put forward by publishers, evaluation and comparison of offers can be difficult. Offers can be, and have been, rejected as not representing good value for money to the community. NESLI has been criticised for working too slowly and presenting offers at a stage in the financial cycle when libraries have committed their journals budget for the academic year. Nevertheless, the first offer from Blackwells Science - which includes access to both current and back issues of their journals - has had a good take-up and it is confidently expected that five or six new offers will be announced very shortly. The first NESLI journals are now being delivered to libraries and the Managing Agent reports that many more publishers are expecting to offer electronic journals only, in 2000. Whilst clearly working towards provision of a critical mass of titles, NESLI is also actively working on value-added e-journal services including subject clusters, e-journal catalogue records and links to and from other electronic sources such as bibliographical databases. The thorny issue of archiving is also firmly on the agenda.

Much work remains, but the Steering Committee remains confident that within the three years of JISC funding and guidance NESLI will have achieved its main objectives.

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