

Promoting the Place of E- Journals in the Academic Environment

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Abstract

This paper submits that both the printed journal and the emerging e-journal enjoy the same status in scholarly publishing. This is because of the peer review concepts which remain inherent in all scholarly publishing. Majority of E-journals are published through Hypertext markup language, portable document format and word processing format. E-journals are available in all subject areas and can be accessed through websites. They are available for access in two major categories: those that attract fee through subscription to publisher and those of open access. They can be downloaded and stored in disks (CDS) which are later bound to hard copy. The paper also examined the problems associated with e-journals. From the findings, the cost of subscription and access has continued to trouble the dissemination of information. Neither the print format nor the e-journal is yet free from this issue. Recommendations were also made for enhancing the place of e journals in the academic environment.

Introduction

To publish any material simply implies making the content public. A published material may assume the format of a text, such as books and journals;

pictures such as photographs and images; voice such as in the radio broadcasting system, and animation such as in the television system. Of all formats of publishing, the text presents the most portable resource. Texts can be lengthy yet cheap to produce, and present the conveniences of portability, readability and simple opportunities for communication and expression for the literate. Text offers a simple avenue for dissemination of ideas and information far different from that put forward by any other means. Thus, publishing is the process of production and dissemination of literature as information. It is the activity of making information available to the public. Since the time of the printing press, publishing has relied on the powers of modern machines to produce and disseminate information. With the advent of digital information systems and the Internet, the scope of publishing has expanded to include electronic resources such as the e-journal and e-books. Considering the importance of e-journals in research and scholarship, this paper attempts to examine their place in the academic environment, problems associated with them, and relevant measures for solving those problems.

Journal Publishing

Journals are a type of serials, that is, publications issued in successive parts, usually at regular intervals, and as a rule, intended to be published indefinitely. Periodicals, newspapers, annuals (such as reports, yearbooks, etc.), memoirs, conference proceedings and transactions of societies can all be classified as serial monographs and publications (Meyer and Beebe, 1999). The

purpose of a scholarly journal is chiefly to disseminate 'new knowledge'. Journals are primarily publications that report original findings of current research.

Journal publishing is a strong medium for scholarly work. Journal publications may be classified as scholarly or non-scholarly. Scholarly journals are primarily concerned with academic work. They have a bias for a particular subject discipline. On the other hand, non-scholarly journals are general in subject outlook. They are often referred to as magazines.

The content of a magazine includes news, reports, feature articles and survey reports. However, some scholarly journals do contain some of these features. The difference is that scholarly journals are specialized in content. Journals can also be identified by their geographical spread. Some journals enjoy a wide audience internationally while others are mostly accepted locally. Scholarly journals are published by any of the following bodies: commercial press; university press; professional associations; research organizations; university faculties and departments; government agencies; and others.

Process of Publication

Scholarly journals are characterized by the periodic release of published issues containing original scholarship. The materials found in and accepted for journal publication go through a system of "peer review". Accepting a material for journal publication involves a long process because the context and content

of the material must be verified and validated (Friedlander and Bassette, 2002). Books and other serial publications are undertaken by scholars to advance the knowledge based on their discipline. Scholars prefer journal publications to books and personal correspondence because they reach a broader audience relatively quickly and are acknowledged (Meyers and Beebe, 1999). The process of publishing a journal article includes: (i) submission of the manuscript by an author; (ii) acceptance of manuscript for further verification and validation; (iii) editorial stage; approval for publishing; (iv) printing and distribution. Functions of a journal are therefore the dissemination of information, providing a sense of quality control through 'peer review' and ensuring that the proceedings are accurately recorded in a given format for the purpose of knowledge and referencing.

The e-journal

The idea of a journal publication was initiated by scholars of Oxford University who had a discussion group they named the "invisible college" in 1640. The group was later renamed the "Royal Society". In fact, the first journal publication in English may be the published proceedings of the Royal Society in 1665, which was titled "The Philosophical Transaction of the Royal Society of London". The growth of scientific literature has continued to increase the growth of scholarly journals all over the world. Tenopir and King (2001) reported that about 6,771 scientific journals were published in 1995 in the United States of America alone. "Ulrich's Guide to Periodicals" currently

contains nearly 157,000 active titles and includes 140,025 print journals.

Since the 1970s, publishers have increasingly applied computer technology to various functions in the publishing and printing processes so as to realize increased efficiency. This has led to the acceptance of the e-journal. The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) in 1997 reported that about 1,465 electronic journals are online. A majority of these titles are accepted as authentic scholarly journals that have imbibed the peer-review process. Meyers and Beebe (1999) reported that the conversion of scholarly literature from the print form to the electronic form often depends on the information-seeking patterns of a particular group of scholars and their disciplines; the level of automation needed to produce and disseminate work; and even the funding pattern of their research.

Many studies conducted have indicated that major shifts in the use of e-journals by academics and researchers have been noticed. These studies have demonstrated how important Internet access to electronic journals has become and that e-journals are well accepted by both researchers and academics (Sathe, Grady & Gluse, 2002; Rusch-Feja & Siebeky, 1999). Thus an increasing number of e-journals are available in all subject areas and are listed on the Web pages. They are accessed at Web pages through the Uniform Resource Locator (URL) or Internet addresses based on the Domain Name System (DNS). These are indicated by the prefix: <http://www>.

Access to e-journals is available in two major categories: one category is those journals that are not of 'free access,' and therefore attract a fee through subscription to the publishers. The other category is the list of e-journals which are tagged as 'open access,' and free for full-text downloads.

E-journal publishers are categorized into three groups. The first category is identified as the large publishers, such as, Elsevier Science Direct (<http://www.elsevier.com>); Blackwell Synergy (<http://www.blackwell-synergy.com>); etc. This publishing category is made up of commercial publishers of online publications. The second category of publishers is identified as small and medium publishers: these include Cambridge Journal Online, Oxford University Press Journals Online, etc. The third category is branded as electronic journal aggregators, such as EBSCO Online, Information Quest, etc. Most of these journals are listed on the Web pages.

Most electronic journals are published using Internet protocols such as Hypertext Mark-up Language (HTML); Portable Document Format (PDF) and Word Processing format (DOC). Electronic publication is represented as arranged computer information which is known as e-publishing. These materials are produced and stored electronically rather than in print. With the use of these software thousands of e-journals are found on the Internet today, and their number is increasing constantly (Cepulkauskaitė, 2000). Back-issues of e-journals are sometimes available on the database of the publishers and can be subscribed to. Storage facilities such as Compact Disks (CDs) are portable

facilities where online journals which were downloaded can be stored. They may form the basis of a 'bound copy' for the library.

Problems associated with e-journals

One criticism of journals in the 20th century has been the increasing lag time from submission to publication. This situation may have made some scholars to resort to electronic self-publishing, thereby leading to dissemination of raw information that has not been vetted or edited by peer review.

Another problem encountered by e-journal publication is that of cost and the availability of infrastructure. The challenges of serial publication in the face of e-journal publication are on how to overcome the cost of production and sustain the business. Few electronic-only journals, if any, are producing revenues in excess of all costs. Odylzko (1997) sampled and analyzed a collection of journal of mathematics and computer science and concluded that the average cost of printing a journal article in the first instance is between \$3,000.00 and \$4,000.00. The production of an e-journal article on the other hand was put at between \$300.00 and \$400.00. However, Mayers and Beebe (1999) countered that the submission by Odylzko (1997) was simplistic and could have undermined the actual cost of production because with all the cost of production and infrastructure put into proper perspective, the cost of publishing one article of the e-journal cannot be less than that of the print format.

The quality of the e-journal can be seen as another issue. The majority of electronic journals published are produced in parallel with the original print

edition. After composition, such journals are delivered through a variety of formats such as floppy disk; magnetic tapes; CD-ROMS and Online. By far online e-journals are the most common format for electronic publication. However it should be noted that the web has provided an easy avenue for self-publishing ventures. These classes of literature are referred to as the grey literature. The intellectual content of grey literature is actually put to question.

E-journal publications are mostly found on closed access. Closed access requires the use of a password which is obtained by subscription. In an academic setting where there may be thousands of users, passwords could introduce administrative complications. This could lead to increase in the cost of subscription. However, many academic institutions and corporate bodies are resorting to profile services, thereby by-passing the problem of individual users.

A profile service provides groups and individuals with 'alerting' services for online publication which will be of interest to the group or individual. This will allow the individual or group to request and download the required publication.

Storage or the preservation of the e-journal can be a very difficult problem to surmount. Storage and archival exercise of the e-journal requires regular refreshing. The storage exercise must embark on frequent back-ups so as to ensure that the material will not degrade and the point of access will not be outmoded. Although storage mediums like the CD-ROMS may last long with proper handling, there is concern about whether the technology or hardware will

still be in existence when access is required in the future.

Some Suggestions on How to Overcome the Problems

In spite of the fact that sometimes authors are desperate to be published, e-journal articles should endeavour to go through the process of the peer review so as to ensure the authenticity of the scholarly claim. The process of reviewing articles sent for publication can be enhanced through the use of e-mail services. Prospective authors should also accompany the submission of text with a softcopy for easy administration. Quality of the electronic journal can be maintained if the traditional ways of ensuring quality control through the editorial board are maintained.

On the question of open access, this is an ongoing debate all over the world. However, the basic question to be answered is who is to shoulder the cost of production. Efforts at providing an umbrella of consortium may further reduce the cost of subscription per individual. The cost of production could be reduced with the advent of newer technologies. Newer technologies should be embraced and put in place in order to improve production and cut down operating costs. This should then increase the opportunity for more accessibility to the e-journal resources.

Conclusion

Journal, whether they are e-journal or the print type, will remain as a strong medium for the dissemination of scholarly work. The process of

publishing an e-journal remains as rigorous as that of the print type. Cost of production is not reducing, neither is the problem of availability of journal publications to individuals and libraries. Cooperative efforts through a form of consortia can help in improving access to journals online. Proper archiving and storage will also help in preserving the e-journal.

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