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The Impact of Aggregator Packages on
Collection Management

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One of the most interesting trends in the library field in recent years has been the development of electronic packages of indexes and journals. These are being marketed to libraries by an increasing number of commercial and non-commercial publishers and organizations. Such major names as the Computer Library Center (OCLC), Wiley, the Institute for Scientific Information, Blackwells, Elsevier, Ebsco, Pergamon, Springer Verlag, Kluwer, and Faxon have developed electronic packages that are now available online at libraries around the country.¹ The fact that many libraries are opting to purchase subscriptions to these aggregated packages suggests that they are having a widespread and significant impact on the library profession that is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. For libraries that subscribe to these packages, it appears that many departments in the library will be affected in some way, including acquisitions, cataloging, reference, automation, and collection management.

Given the rapid development and widespread adoption of aggregator packages by libraries, what are some of the ways they are affecting collection management? It is the purpose of this study to explore what some of the implications of aggregator packages for this particular area of the library might be. For example, in what way might the roles of the collection manager and bibliographers be influenced by these packages? How are aggregator packages affecting the collection itself and how collections are used? In what ways might packages be improved to make them easier to select, integrate and manage as elements of the overall collection of the library?

To date, very little has been written about the possible effects of aggregator packages on the library in general and collection development in particular. Perhaps this is due to their relative newness, but it may also be a function of their seemingly ever-

changing nature. Many of the features and options offered by these packages, as well as the terms under which they are offered, are still developing, thus making them difficult to write about. Indeed, trying to write about such products is a bit like trying to hit a moving target. It is not the purpose of this article to attempt to elucidate all the idiosyncrasies offered by the multitude of packages now available, which seem to change almost daily. Rather, it is to explore in more general terms some of the broader issues and implications that aggregator packages might present for collection management.

Before doing so, it might be a good idea to define what is meant by the term “aggregator packages.” For the purposes of this study, aggregator packages are broadly defined as groups of electronic indexes or journals consisting of up to hundreds of titles, that are bundled together by an aggregator in the form of a web-accessible package that is then marketed to libraries. The package often features a common interface and search commands, and is generally available on a subscription basis.

Origin and Development

The rise of aggregator packages is a phenomenon that has not been well documented, either in the library literature or elsewhere. Nonetheless, it may be possible to construct a crude history of the emergence of some of the better known, more popular packages. The first aggregated package appears to have its origins at OCLC.² It was there that electronic publishing first evolved from a single journal model to a journal cluster model. In the early nineties, publishers initially began offering single titles running on proprietary software, but as the web developed, they largely abandoned this strategy in favor of one that offered web access to clusters of journals. The web helped to

open up the market by providing a broad platform that many libraries could adopt. OCLC believed that although libraries were willing to experiment with electronic journals, in order to persuade libraries to adopt them on a widespread basis, they had to offer a “critical mass.” By offering libraries electronic journals as a package, OCLC believed they could help both libraries and publishers make a transition from paper to electronic format. By aggregating titles, publishers believed they would better convince libraries that these packages represented a real substitute for their print journal collections, more so than offering single titles ever could. The economics would be more compelling as well, because for a single access fee, the library could buy many titles at once. Libraries could acquire journals less expensively than if they were to buy single titles, plus enjoying a host of other benefits that aggregators might provide as part of a package. Aggregators offer such advantages as searchable databases, cross-referenced hypertext links between records, full text delivery in HTML or PDF formats, and in some instances, archiving of back issues, assistance with acquisitions and licensing, and title-specific usage statistics.

In developing Electronic Collections Online, their aggregated package, OCLC created a collection development policy that called for offering a critical mass of journals that would justify the library undertaking the transition from print to electronic access. The policy also specified that there be broad coverage of disciplines, and the provision of “core journals” within each subject area. The focus would be on offering electronic versions of already existing print journals, in an attempt to offer an electronic alternative to the library’s print journal core. Publishers who participate are asked by OCLC to provide as many titles as possible from their catalogs as soon as they can. To make the

electronic package more appealing to libraries, OCLC's collection development policy calls for electronic titles to be delivered on or before print dates, the delivery of not only articles but the entire content of each journal, and the provision of journal content in a form that closely mirrors the traditional printed journal page.³

Interestingly, the article makes no reference to OCLC's other aggregated package, FirstSearch. This is a large collection of online databases introduced in 1991 that consists largely of periodical indexes, which many libraries around the country now subscribe to. FirstSearch allows end users to access these electronic indexes via a relatively simple common interface that can be accessed from anywhere on campus. Many of the indexes available through FirstSearch are electronic versions of paper or CD-ROM indexes commonly available in the reference collections of academic libraries, such as CIJE, Psychological Abstracts, MLA, BIOSIS, and many Wilson indexes. Many of the FirstSearch databases are updated more frequently or offer more extensive coverage than their paper or CD-ROM counterparts, and many of the records link to local holdings statements. In cases where a FirstSearch database overlaps with an already existing database in the collection, the library's system administrator has the ability to block redundant databases from appearing on the screen.⁴

OCLC may be the earliest and most influential aggregator, but more recently several major publishers have also come up with their own aggregated offerings. In 1994, Johns Hopkins University Press initiated Project Muse, a collection of 42 electronic versions of the Press's print journals available by subscription via the World Wide Web. The purpose of Project Muse was to improve access to journal content by making articles available to multiple users simultaneously, and by offering both full text searching and

searchable subject headings. The Project is different from other aggregator packages in that it offers uniformly high quality publications, allows use of its articles to fill interlibrary loan requests, and offers single title subscriptions at ten percent less than the paper versions.⁵

In 1995, an electronic archive of the back issues of important journals called JSTOR became available to libraries via the World Wide Web. JSTOR was originally created to help resolve the space problems created by libraries needing to store extensive back runs of volumes of print journals. By creating a database of the back issues of journals, JSTOR provides researchers with remote simultaneous access to social sciences, humanities, and science journals.⁶ Users can limit their searches to particular types of content such as articles or book reviews, and can browse journals as well as conduct searches on specific topics. Eventually JSTOR plans to include hundreds of titles across a wide variety of disciplines.

The following year, Academic Press introduced Ideal (“International Digital Electronic Access Library”) a package that included the complete 1996 issues of 175 Academic Press journals. Subscribers can browse the full text via the web. Although hundreds of institutions have subscribed in the belief that the package offers enhanced access to many more titles, some libraries have chosen not to. Some of their reasons for declining include the price, and the fact that journal titles must be subscribed to as a package and cannot be selected individually. Some institutions do not like the fact that they are locked into multi-year contracts and do not have the ability to cancel little-used or expensive titles. Some of the requirements are waived for smaller public and special

libraries, which can, for example, subscribe through consortia even if they have no print subscriptions to any of Academic's journals.⁷

The Role of Consortia

The fact that Ideal will only negotiate with consortia rather than with individual institutions suggests that library networks may play an important role in influencing the cost and terms of aggregator packages. By negotiating contracts for group access to aggregator packages, regional library cooperatives are able to obtain a discount for their member institutions. In turn, aggregators benefit by being able to market packages to a larger subscription base, including many smaller libraries that might not otherwise be able to afford such packages.⁸

The role of consortia may go beyond negotiating price, however. To some degree, consortia may be able to influence what the content of aggregator packages will consist of. This sometimes involves a process in which a particular consortium may survey its member libraries and ask them to vote on various content options, e.g. a certain roster of databases. The option that receives the most votes may then become the package that all the voting libraries are subscribed to, with perhaps minor local modifications. This is particularly true when libraries decide not to subscribe to a complete package or cannot afford to, and must then negotiate for the portion of the package that best suits their local needs.⁹

For those libraries that are able to afford the full package, the contents are not always available on an a la carte basis. That is, not all packages allow libraries to pick and choose particular databases or journal titles, whether they are members of a

consortium or not. The contents are offered on what amounts to a “take it or leave it” basis, so that an individual library is not able to tailor a package to meet the local needs of its user population. The library either subscribes to all of the contents of the package, or none of it. This represents a significant departure from the customary title by title selection process that has been typical of collection management in the past. Even approval plans have offered selectors the opportunity to accept or reject materials on a title by title basis.

The Changing Role of the Collection Manager

The emergence of aggregator packages, whether mediated by consortia or not, is a trend that will continue to affect the role of the collection manager. The core issues appear to be related to selection and control. If electronic journals and indexes are sold as packages, how much of the selection is performed by the collection manager (and the library’s staff of selectors) and how much is performed by the aggregator? It is true that the collection manager still has control over whether a particular package is selected or rejected, but not necessarily its contents.

In effect, it may be the case that aggregator packages have usurped the traditional role of the collection manager. The new economics of mass acquisitions may mean that the collection manager, in the interest of procuring many titles at a discount, has had to sacrifice a degree of local collection control. For while the overall package may represent a worthwhile addition to the collection, some of the contents may be material that the library might not otherwise choose to collect. This leaves the collection manager

in an odd position, as well as other selectors or bibliographers who may be called upon by faculty or students to explain the presence of a particular title or titles in the collection.

If the collection manager does not have complete control over the contents of the package, it may be that his or her role has shifted from one of micro-selection to macro-selection.¹⁰ That is, selection is not so much a matter of choosing the contents of a package as it is choosing between different packages. It is interesting to speculate how this shift might affect the overall role of the collection manager within the organizational make up of the library. On the one hand, the shift from micro- to macro- selection could be interpreted as an erosion of the ability of the collection manager to “fine tune” the contents of the collection. Yet it may also be possible that although collection management decisions may no longer be made on a title by title basis, the decision whether to acquire a particular package involving multiple titles becomes more important, thus enhancing the role of the collection manager. Because of the importance of these decisions, committees of selectors may be involved, and the collection manager may be called upon to convene, conduct, and coordinate these individuals in the decision making process, enhancing the administrative aspects of the role.

Another way the role of the collection manager may be changing is with regard to acquisitions. Just as there may be less emphasis on micro-analysis of package content, there may be increased emphasis on the role of the collection manager in the acquisition of the package. This includes initiating contact with the aggregator, possibly arranging a trial period, and later, if the package is selected, negotiating the complex terms and licensing details often associated with acquiring packages. It appears that in some

libraries the roles of collection manager and acquisitions head may be overlapping or blurring in the case of aggregator packages.¹¹

Aggregator Packages and the Double Standard

With the rising cost of serials and the increasingly intense scrutiny that paper serial subscriptions have been subjected to recently, it is difficult not to compare the selection process with that for aggregator packages. Compared to the stringent standards that are normally imposed on each title in the selection process for paper serials, the review process for aggregator packages seems relatively lax. Rarely are individual titles in a package subjected to the same kind of careful review that is reserved for their paper counterparts. In some cases, the library may already own the paper versions of many of the titles in a package, and perhaps this may help account for the discrepancy. Yet it seems especially ironic, given the questions raised about the quality of electronic versions of journals.¹² Perhaps buying in bulk makes the careful review of dozens or even hundreds of titles seem too daunting or simply impractical. The fact that many packages are often a “mixed bag” of established, high quality publications bundled together with more marginal titles makes it easier to overlook the mediocre offerings. The presence of some prominent titles may create a “halo effect,” making the overall package appear more desirable than it actually is.

If the collection manager is not always able to select on a title by title basis, and the selection of the content of aggregator packages is being performed by the aggregator, another important question arises. How selective are the aggregators themselves? Do they exercise high standards in deciding whether to include a particular title, or will they

consider virtually any publisher that is willing to work with them? At present, most aggregators have not provided much detail regarding the process they use to select particular titles for inclusion in a package, or the specific criteria used. Packages simply appear with a pre-determined content and without any rationale for their inclusion. Indeed, entire subject areas or disciplines may be included or excluded from a package without any justification on the part of the aggregator.

It is too early to tell what effect the inclusion of particular titles will have on the publishers themselves. Conceivably, many publishers may benefit by the inclusion of their titles in a package, because the aggregator is offering the publisher broader distribution of it to a wider audience. Yet what happens to those publications that are not included in a package? Will the exclusion of these publications affect their use?¹³ It seems possible that the viability of some smaller journals could be threatened by the very fact that they are not part of a package.

The double standard for aggregator packages may be explained in part by the nature of the market itself, and the laws of supply and demand. Currently, there are relatively few aggregator packages offering a broad array of journals. Many packages are strong in a particular area, such as the sciences. Yet there are many collection managers and library administrators eager to acquire as many electronic products as they can afford. In large academic research libraries in particular, there appears to be competitive pressure to see which library can assemble the most packages the fastest. This may be because administrators think packages are a quick way of creating the perception on campus or in the profession that their library is “state of the art” or “cutting edge,” because they have become a repository of more electronic titles than other libraries.

Whether the particular titles are high quality or even are relevant to local needs seems of secondary importance. Yet from the standpoint of package content, without the ability to control title selection better, aggregator packages may appear to be one more instance of “just in case” collecting.¹⁴

How Packages Compromise Selectors

The pre-determined nature of many aggregator packages can create problems for subject selectors, particularly those with liaison responsibilities. Such packages often include some titles that may be inappropriate for a particular audience because they are, for example, too elementary, out of scope, or contain only a portion of the contents of another database but do not indicate they are a subset. For the selectors, it becomes much more difficult to utilize resources they themselves did not (and perhaps would not, given the choice) choose. If one knows a resource is inappropriate or inadequate, it becomes difficult and perhaps even hypocritical to refer students or faculty to it or to teach its use in user instruction classes. It is also difficult to rationalize its presence in the library’s collection at all to users who may question it.

Explaining inappropriate titles to the library’s constituents is only part of the problem. If the inappropriate items happen to be indexes, the selector is also faced with the problem of whether or not to purchase books and journals to support them. This is particularly difficult to contemplate at a time when there is seldom adequate funds to purchase material to support resources that are appropriate.

In a larger sense, the reduction of choice may be seen as a form of deprofessionalization of the selector’s role. The situation may be somewhat analogous to

what happened to professional catalogers in the eighties.¹⁵ With the development of the OCLC cataloging database, cataloging could be downloaded by copy catalogers.

Professional catalogers were no longer needed to do original cataloging, since most records could be found in the OCLC database. Aggregator packages would appear to make the role of the selector less necessary to some extent, but the role of the selector regarding books has remained largely unaffected, unless one considers approval plans a form of deprofessionalization.¹⁶

Impact on Collections and Collection Use

Aggregator packages offer many benefits to libraries because they enable an institution to acquire a large number of titles often at a discount. Many of the packages feature a common interface that encourages cross searching of databases and related sources. Some of the packages are also more up to date and more comprehensive in their index coverage than their CD-ROM counterparts.

The packages are not without limitations, however. Many of these are technological in nature. Some packages have access problems, and subscribers have found that at times certain aggregator packages may be inaccessible for a variety of reasons that may include technical difficulties at the aggregators site, problems at the providers end, or connection breakdowns attributable to the internet itself.¹⁷

The unreliability of aggregator packages creates problems from a collection management standpoint, because it puts pressure on the collection manager to collect the same material in multiple formats. Libraries that feel they cannot rely on dependable access to a package may feel a need to maintain paper or CD-ROM subscriptions to the

same material provided by the package, even though it overlaps. This puts a strain on the budget, and also makes liaison work more difficult for selectors who must then explain to faculty and students the differences between the various formats. In spite of the efforts of liaisons to teach users the differences, many of them still end up being confused by the overlap.

The instability of aggregator packages is not the only technical problem they face. Response time can be another drawback with some packages. In some instances, the response time can be so slow as to render the entire package useless to anyone seeking to locate sources within a reasonable period of time. This can be more frustrating to users than not being able to access the system at all, and it makes the resources difficult or impossible to teach or demonstrate in user instruction sessions.

Although access and response difficulties are not uncommon to many electronic products that librarians work with, the number of titles involved in aggregator packages compounds the problem. It may be inconvenient to a few users if one electronic database or journal is unavailable, but when 50 or 100 or more titles are suddenly unavailable, the potential impact is much greater, along with the number of users inconvenienced. As collection development continues to shift from ownership to access,¹⁸ any problems with access are magnified. Given the wide scale inconvenience that may potentially result from technical problems with a package, it seems unusual that aggregators do not offer any compensation or allowances in their contracts for such problems. It seems equally odd that libraries do not insist that aggregators include a clause in their contracts that technical problems will be redressed. Libraries should be entitled to a rebate or discount for services that have been contracted for but have not been provided.

Another common technical problem with some aggregator packages is that certain advertised features may not be available to users. A good example are full-text article databases in which the aggregator has failed to provide or activate the full text. This can be confusing to users who see the name “full text” in the title or read about it on the introductory screen of a database, only to find that they are provided with the citation and abstract only, or that certain key elements such as tables, photos, graphs or illustrations are missing.¹⁹

One of the most serious technical problems that plague aggregator packages is that, although the titles in a package are valuable, the software used to run the package may be inferior to non-packaged titles. When aggregators bundle a number of valuable databases together in a package and then use a software program to run them that is not powerful, it creates problems for collection management. The collection manager is then faced with the dilemma of having to decide if it is necessary to subscribe to both versions of the same database, because one has more powerful search features, while the other is less expensive but also less useful because of poor software.

The Issue of Integration

One of the most interesting issues that arises with aggregator packages is how to integrate them into the existing collection.²⁰ Since the quality of a collection is determined not only by its contents, but how accessible the contents are, it is critical that aggregator packages be well integrated with both paper resources as well as other electronic resources. The packaged nature of aggregated products makes this difficult.

One reason why packages may be difficult to integrate is that a “package” is not necessarily a meaningful unit to users. In a web-based environment, it is not uncommon to see links on many library OPACS labeled “FirstSearch,” “Project Muse,” “Electronic Collections Online,” “Ideal,” etc. But what do such labels mean to a user? Perhaps a more meaningful label might be less package-oriented and more descriptive of function, such as “Electronic Indexes” or “Electronic Journal Articles.”

For those libraries that subscribe to more than one package, a related concern is the inconvenience and confusion created among users by having to switch between packages. Often a comprehensive search will require using more than one package, but how does the user know that, and how does the user know which package to switch to? The pre-packaged form of aggregated products makes it difficult to identify and integrate the specific contents with the rest of the collection, and with other packages.

Clearly, there is a need to arrange and display packages to the public more meaningfully. One way to improve the situation might be to unbundle the contents of various packages and arrange them in a more integrated logical scheme. This would allow the library to classify them by both type of resource and by subject matter, which would seem much more useful to users than a series of package labels. Some libraries are already beginning to break down packages to make their contents more accessible to users.²¹

The Impact of Package Size and Content

The pre-packaged, “take it or leave it” nature of some aggregator packages raises the question of whether one size really does fit all. For example, the library that decides

to subscribe to a large package of electronic indexes may find that it puts a strain on local journal holdings. Users who take advantage of the additional indexes may find that their search results are much larger and that they are able to locate many more relevant citations than they were previously able to using the old collection. When the users then check the library's holdings and discover that the library owns many of the books and journals listed in the citations, they may begin to make more use of these titles. This may put a strain on local holdings, particularly if selectors have not been able to anticipate greater usage in the effected areas or if some of the databases in the package are outside the scope of the collection.

Many of the titles cited in the user's search results may not be held by the library. Users may then try to obtain the titles through interlibrary lending. It then becomes a question of whether the interlibrary lending department will have sufficient staff and resources to meet the increased demand.²² Administrators may find that the budget for ILL has to be supplemented in order to satisfy user expectations. It seems somewhat ironic that the library may have acquired the aggregator package with the idea of enhancing the collection. Yet its intended effect may actually have been to raise user expectations of the collection, and corresponding user dissatisfaction if it becomes apparent that those demands cannot be met by existing resources. There is also irony in the fact that the library that is hoping to save money by buying titles in packages may end up spending additional funds to support interlibrary lending or new book or serials purchases.

In some instances the scope of aggregator packages, the sheer number of titles indexed in it, may be a source of confusion to users. The library that buys a package of

thirty, forty, fifty, or sixty or more databases, or a package of electronic journals with fifty or more titles, may unwittingly make it more difficult for the user to locate the appropriate title or titles to search in. Some packages also contain similar titles, or databases that are little more than subsets of larger databases. These parody databases can be particularly confusing to users who see that the titles and contents are similar but may not understand the subtle differences between them. This opens up the possibility that users will make more search errors because they have selected the wrong databases to search in at the outset.²³

Problems of Balance and Instability

Aggregator packages are usually offered by publishers, and the contents of the package tends to reflect the particular strengths and weaknesses of the publisher. Thus if a publisher has particular strengths in the humanities, the package will be similarly strong in that subject area. Since many packages have these subject biases, when the library acquires the package, it tends to create an automatic imbalance in the collection. Unless the library happens to be particularly weak in that subject area, the collection manager may feel pressure to purchase other packages with strengths in the neglected area in an effort to restore some sense of balance. The collection manager seeking a well-rounded collection of electronic resources will almost certainly have to purchase several packages to achieve that end, and may still be left with gaps. Purchasing multiple packages may also create the problem of overlap in certain subject areas, and it may be difficult to avoid at least some duplication. Another consideration is how the user will be able to understand the strengths and weaknesses of various packages in order to make optimal

use of them. One possible solution might be to try to unbundle them and arrange them in subject areas.

This problem of balance is not necessarily limited to electronic resources. There is also the question of how a package may fit in with the paper collection as well. If a package is strong in a particular subject area the collection manager may feel that it is important to collect more heavily in paper to rectify any inequity that may be created. This may be particularly true if it is determined that users are utilizing the package at the expense of more appropriate paper resources. Sometimes the mere fact that a group of titles are packaged may create a bias on the part of users to gravitate toward it at the expense of paper resources. Users may be deceived into thinking that the packaged nature of the titles makes them appear as if they are the complete set of resources that the library has to offer on the subject. In such instances, they may be misled into thinking they have performed an exhaustive search without realizing that there are paper resources that should be consulted.

Another concern raised by aggregator packages has to do with the stability of the contents.²⁴ Simply because a package may come with certain titles is no guarantee that the same titles will continue to be offered by the aggregator. Individual titles may be added or dropped without notice. This can have the effect of creating sudden gaps or imbalances in the collection, as well as confusion among the users and staff who discover that a given resource may be present one day, and gone the next. Moreover, the decision of the aggregator to drop a title may be made on the basis of global usage statistics rather than local ones. It may not matter to an aggregator whether a particular database or

journal is heavily used at a particular institution. If the overall use statistics do not make offering the database cost effective for the aggregator, it may be discontinued.

The instability of aggregator packages can create serious problems when an aggregator cancels a title that the collection manager has already cancelled in another format, such as CD-ROM or paper. The collection manager may then have to resubscribe and scramble to obtain any back issues that have been missed. It also suggests that collection managers who hope to subscribe to a package with the idea of eventually canceling overlapping or duplicate titles in another format may be taking a gamble. There is no guarantee that an aggregator will maintain a particular title over an extended period.

This problem also has implications for archiving. If aggregator packages cannot be counted on to maintain particular titles, then paper subscriptions to journals and indexes may have to be maintained in order to ensure that a version is available in some form free of any gaps.²⁵ This places a great strain on collection management budgets because it means that the collection manager who wants to acquire aggregator packages must collect simultaneously in both electronic and paper formats in order to be safe.

Issues of Inappropriateness and Format

Most titles available in aggregator packages are geared toward a postsecondary level and are intended for use in academic research. However, some of the indexes and journals that are bundled together with scholarly titles are not scholarly. This seems especially true of some periodical databases, which may index many popular periodicals along with a few scholarly ones. Often these more popular databases are included with a

package of scholarly databases. The intention of the aggregator may be to broaden the appeal of the package to a wider market that includes public libraries, but the actual effect may be to make the packages less useful to both public and academic library markets.

The presence of pop databases bundled together with scholarly ones creates particular problems for academic libraries. Freshman and sophomore level students who are struggling to understand the differences between popular and scholarly periodicals may find the presence of pop databases confusing. They may have more difficulty completing assignments from faculty who specify that the student use only scholarly sources, because the pop titles have to be weeded out of the overall search results. Some of the pop index titles may overlap with scholarly titles, and contain similar subject matter, which may add to the confusion of students and even faculty.

Students and faculty who use these databases may find that the library's collection does not support their research. Many popular journals indexed in these packages may be outside the scope of the library's collection. Some users may then wonder why the library has such indexes or why the library does not own the journals indexed in them. Either way there is potential for user dissatisfaction. The presence of such mixed-audience packages may put strains on liaisons that have to explain the differences between scholarly and popular periodicals. The interlibrary loan demand generated by inappropriate titles may create additional problems. The collection manager seeking to use interlibrary loan data for use studies may find the data skewed or contaminated by the presence of such titles.²⁶

Some aggregator packages also offer formats that are inconsistent from one database to another. While some of the titles may be offered as full-text databases, others

in the same package are not. This may be the result of the aggregator making the database available both with a full text and a non full-text option. In some instances the introductory description that is displayed to the user may say it is full text, but the library or the consortium may not have contracted for the full text version. The user sees that the database is described as full text, or finds that some databases are available as full text and some are not, and is confused. User expectations may be raised as well, resulting in potential dissatisfaction if the user discovers that, unlike other titles in the package that he or she has used, the titles he now hopes to obtain full text material from only offer citations and abstracts.

This inconsistency of formats may also affect collection development when attempts are made to evaluate collection usage. Those aggregator packages that offer statistical reports by tracking user transactions may indicate that the full-text databases are being used more heavily than non-full text. The reason may be that users are gravitating toward the full-text databases simply because of their format, without regard to content. Other databases that offer more appropriate content but that are not available in full-text format may be underutilized simply because of format.

Aggregator Packages and Cooperative Collection Development

In recent years, libraries have only been able to acquire subscriptions to a limited number of paper journals, and depend on borrowing from other libraries to obtain the rest. This situation was necessitated by a combination of shrinking budgets and the rapid growth of new titles. This arrangement has constituted a kind of informal cooperative collection development among libraries. It has allowed libraries to develop strengths in

certain areas and rely on other libraries for the rest.²⁷ With regard to aggregator packages, this tacit understanding between libraries may not be possible.

Most aggregators have placed usage restrictions on their packages that forbid libraries that subscribe to them from lending electronic titles through interlibrary loan. That is, a library is generally not permitted to print out a copy of an online article and send it to another library that requests it. Aggregators forbid this practice because they consider it a form of document delivery rather than interlibrary lending. They are concerned that electronic journals will make interlibrary borrowing so easy that many libraries will not bother to subscribe to their packages.

Such policies may force libraries to expand their electronic collections, even though they may be duplicating the holdings of other neighboring institutions. This arrangement is not cost effective for any of the libraries involved, and it may result in needless duplication of titles. It also casts doubt on the future of the historic cooperation that has existed among libraries with regard to lending their holdings.

Conclusion

The rapid development of aggregator packages and their widespread adoption by many libraries has made it possible for institutions to purchase a large number of electronic indexes and journals relatively inexpensively. The economics of purchasing aggregated electronic resources in bulk, combined with competitive pressure in the library profession for institutions to be perceived as “state of the art” repositories of cutting edge technology has led many librarians to uncritically embrace these packages. Moreover, these conditions have combined to heighten the impact that aggregator

packages have had on collection management. As this study has tried to suggest, a closer analysis of the situation reveals that aggregator packages are very much a mixed blessing. They offer obvious advantages to any collection manager seeking to acquire a large collection of electronic titles inexpensively. But packages also present a number of issues and concerns for collection management that selectors need to keep in mind. Ultimately, these may need to be addressed before packages can genuinely be viewed as a critical catalyst in the transition to the much-heralded digital library.²⁸

There are several ways aggregators can improve packages so that they will be more useful to both collection managers and users. To begin with, aggregators need to give selectors more control over the contents of a package. The input of collection managers should be solicited at the planning stages, not after the package has been assembled. One possibility might be to create an editorial or advisory board of collection management professionals to help determine package contents, coverage, design, and related issues.

Another way aggregators can improve packages is to simplify and liberalize contractual and licensing terms. The conditions by which a library agrees to subscribe to a package should not be so intricate and complex that they require a lawyer to interpret them. Aggregators should realize the experimental nature of packages and should be accordingly open and flexible about the conditions under which they agree to license them. Contract terms should be negotiated with the overall aim of maximizing access for users, and the special interests of both aggregators and librarians should be secondary. The integrity and stability of packages cannot be assumed to be a given, and there should be stipulations in the contract that if an aggregator cannot provide quick and reliable

connections with some degree of consistency, the library is entitled to be reimbursed for lack of service. Contracts should also provide some assurance that specific titles in a package cannot be dropped or discontinued for a specific time period, and that titles cannot be cancelled or added without reasonable prior notice.

It would also help collection managers and selectors if aggregators could explain what selection criteria are used to decide which titles are included in a package. These decision criteria are not necessarily obvious or implicit. For example, was the selection based on economic considerations, scholarly criteria, popularity, availability, or some combination of these variables? How were the criteria arrived at? How does one title relate to the rest of the titles in a package? These are some questions that can and should be answered, and the answers should appear in the literature describing the package, so that it can be reviewed prior to purchase. Librarians are entitled to know why particular titles were chosen or excluded, and what, if any, is the relationship between those titles.

Aggregators can make the role of collection manager easier by making an effort to ensure that the software used to run a package is not substandard or inferior to other products on the market. This will help prevent selectors from being placed in the situation of having to subscribe to the same title twice, simply because one version has a more powerful search engine, while the other has less search capability but may be included as part of larger package. If a group of databases are valuable enough to bundle together as a package, they are worth packaging with a powerful search engine that is capable of performing beyond basic boolean searches. The contents of a package should be capable of being “unbundled,” so that titles can be arranged and displayed to users more meaningfully than by the name of the package. Libraries should have the option to

arrange titles by whatever scheme they think will be most useful to their users, whether it be subject, call number, or some other arrangement.

One additional way aggregators can make packages more appealing to libraries and collection managers is to offer packages in a variety of sizes. The “one size fits all” concept is not necessarily true when it comes to libraries. A smaller library may not be able to purchase a package of several hundred titles, or may not want to if it is likely to overwhelm collection use or interlibrary loan. Aggregators might offer such an institution a core package of titles, with an option of adding more peripheral titles as needed. They might also make available somewhat larger packages for mid-sized libraries.

Aggregators also might consider the possibility of creating separate packages targeted to separate markets. An aggregator could assemble one set of titles for a public library, and another set of titles for an academic library. Titles specific to each package would be chosen on the basis of their appropriateness to that library’s audience. The availability of separate packages would mean that collection managers might no longer end up with hybrid packages that contain a confusing combination of public and academic titles. Users would also be less distracted by having to worry whether a particular database or journal was popular or scholarly.

Packages could be further improved if aggregators would make an effort to avoid titles that overlap or duplicate one another. In cases where one database is merely a subset of another, this would be clearly indicated on the opening screen of the database. The differences between the two databases should be explained concisely, and any limitations of the database should be enumerated. If the database is a subset of a larger

database, the reason why it was created should also be stated. If packaged titles have a paper analog, that should be prominently stated, so that the user is not misled to believe that searching in one title constitutes an exhaustive search. Full and accurate disclosure of the strengths and weaknesses of a database would aid collection managers in the selection process, and would help users get a better grasp of what the particular title is and how it might best be used.

In assembling packages of electronic databases and journals, aggregators should strive for a collection of titles that is as well rounded in terms of subject matter as possible. Releasing a package that is heavily weighted in the humanities makes it more likely that a collection manager will have to seek more balance by acquiring other packages with strengths in the social or physical sciences. Subject biases should be eliminated from packages as much as possible so that the library does not have to purchase multiple packages to achieve a balanced collection. Aggregators that have developed subject strengths in particular areas might consider the possibility of entering into collaborative ventures with one another to produce packages with greater breadth of coverage.

Finally, the future of cooperative collection development is dependent on the ability of libraries to lend and borrow materials with as few restrictions as possible. Aggregators have little evidence so far that suggests that making the contents of packages available via interlibrary lending will discourage potential customers from subscribing. Until such time as this becomes clear, aggregators should make package content freely available for sharing among libraries.

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