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## The Next Step in Scholarly Communication: Is the Traditional Journal Dead?

Jeanne Galvin

*CUNY Queensborough Community College*

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ELECTRONIC JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC AND SPECIAL LIBRARIANSHIP

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**The Next Step in Scholarly Communication:  
Is the Traditional Journal Dead?**



Jeanne Galvin

Electronic journals have been applauded as a solution to the serials pricing crisis, a step toward environmentally responsible behavior and a means for scholars to expedite and expand their modes of communication. On the other hand, until fairly recently some scholars regarded electronic journals as ephemeral and inaccessible to all but the technologically proficient. As rising prices force libraries to cancel subscriptions each year and publication delays slow scholarly communication and academic careers, electronic journals seem to offer some promise. The article will review the recent advances made by electronic journals and the current challenges remaining for scholarly communication.

**Old assumptions about electronic journals**

The earliest concept of an electronic journal was actually an electronic version of a print journal, a mechanism that worked only for journals which did not include complex charts, formulas and graphics. These journals could be delivered by electronic mail to subscribers. Electronic journals freed the user from needing to visit a library to read a journal and represented a potential cost saving because the expenses of printing and mailing would be eliminated. Variations on this model involved the transmission of tables of contents and/or abstracts and required that the potential reader either “ftp” or order the article by e-mail. If the journal was not offered for free, a password or an appropriate internet address would be required for access. A substantial step forward came with the web journal which is not actually delivered to individual users. These journals are filled with hypertext links not only to their own contents, but to other web sites.

**Proliferation and increased acceptability of electronic journals**

When the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) published the first directory of ejournals and newsletters in 1991, 110 titles were listed. Now in its eighth edition, it lists thousands of titles. Other directories, such as NewJour-1, the Leiden University’s list of electronic journals, and the Directory of Open Access Journals (maintained by Lund University) also list several thousand titles each. While the predictions of the

demise of print journals have not proved true, it is evident that electronic journals have made serious inroads as a vehicle for scholarly communication.

The first advantage of electronic journals that comes to mind is the financial savings. We are very aware of the threats to scholarly communication and to academic careers that are created by the expense of print journals. The price of journals in mathematics, coupled with copyright restrictions which limit the use of interlibrary loan for obtaining journal articles, have provided the impetus for some scholars to begin to rely on electronic journals to facilitate communication. Publishers, such as the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI), as well as aggregators, such as EBSCO and Information Access, are making attractive offers to provide electronic access to large numbers of journals. Several studies have addressed questions of actual savings and impact on users realized by a transition to electronic journals. A current project at Drexel University<sup>1</sup> has as its aim the evaluation of the economic implications of converting the current journal collection of a university library to an all-digital format. At City University of New York Subash Gandhi<sup>2</sup> reported on a feasibility study for the transition from print to electronic journals in chemistry and biochemistry. Another study by Christa Easton<sup>3</sup> reviewed the experiences of several major universities as they considered the move from print to electronic format. A study by Palmer and Sandler<sup>4</sup> at the University of Michigan revealed a strong preference among faculty for e-journals. In addition to the users' perception that e-journals were saving the expense of space and bindery costs, users preferred the convenience of availability of journals anytime. All of these studies found that some of the savings realized from eliminating print subscriptions were eroded by the costs of maintaining the electronic journal collection. These costs included maintenance of technology and staff time spent in selecting and reviewing electronic subscriptions and aggregator packages. However, the preference of users was overwhelmingly in favor of electronic subscriptions. Librarians have begun to realize that the expense of maintaining both print and electronic formats of the same material cannot be justified. The trend is definitely to move toward the electronic format.

From the scholar/author's point of view, other benefits of electronic publication are speed and freedom from constraints of journal length. Publication delays are no longer necessary, nor do worthy articles need to be eliminated from journals due to space restrictions.

### **Progress toward acceptance in the academic community**

Some of the early deterrents to the use of electronic journals involved the system of academic tenure and promotion, cumbersome technology and concerns about archiving.

In order to attain tenure and promotion scholars must not only do research, but also must have it published in accepted journals. Margaret Boden<sup>5</sup> pointed out that electronic

journals would become a viable substitute for print only when and if the scholarly community accepted them. This situation has been mentioned frequently in the literature. In 1992, Jordan<sup>6</sup> found only 7.45% of faculty surveyed read electronic journals. Shamp<sup>7</sup> found a willingness to publish electronically in the field of communication, but such publication was viewed as a way to communicate research findings rather than to advance careers. Cronin and Overfelt<sup>8</sup> found in their survey of Personnel and Tenure policies at fifty universities that electronic publication was not explicitly discounted, but that many respondents were unaware that the peer review process was used in scholarly electronic journals. Lancaster<sup>9</sup> also pointed out in a report of a survey of library directors and academic administrators that while the idea of networked scholarly publishing received strong support from both groups, academic administrators were less certain that universities would soon be able to overcome the administrative and financial barriers to establishing such a system. The findings of H. Julianne Butler's<sup>10</sup> survey of ten scholarly electronic journals, their requirements, and their contributors indicate that while electronic publication is not overtly degraded, contributors themselves felt that it carried less weight than print publication.

However, by the mid-1990s the situation began to change, as evidenced by several statements by academics and by the involvement of major research universities in scholarly electronic journal projects. James S. Gardner<sup>11</sup>, Vice President and Provost of the University of Manitoba, has noted that the opportunities for evaluation of post publication impact afforded by the electronic medium make it a valuable tool in assessing the work of a scholar. The Modern Language Association in 1993 issued a Statement on Computer Support which urged review committees for tenure and promotion to consider computer related work as an integral part of a candidate's dossier and to evaluate it according to its merit in the discipline.

By 1999, universities such as Rutgers included guidelines for citing electronic publications in their instructions for tenure and promotion. It was becoming generally accepted that a candidate for tenure or promotion might include electronic publications in his dossier.

The fact that universities and respected publishers have become involved in electronic journals certainly gives credibility to the medium. The Online Computer Library Center (better known as OCLC) was a pioneer in this movement with its strictly online journal, Current Clinical Trials. It is now offering an array of electronic journals and has been joined in the field of electronic publishing by several similar ventures, such as Institute for Scientific Information (ISI), Elsevier, and EBSCO.

Further evidence of academic acceptance of electronic journals has been found in the fact that so many prestigious institutions have signed the Budapest Open Access Initiative (BOAI)<sup>12</sup> and have become members of the Scholarly Publishing and

Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC)<sup>13</sup>. Over 200 prominent organizations and universities have signed in support of BOAI which has as its goal “the world-wide electronic distribution of the peer-reviewed journal literature and completely free and unrestricted access to it by all scientists, scholars, teachers, students, and other curious minds.<sup>14</sup> The framers of the initiative saw new technology as the means for accomplishing this goal. SPARC, a coalition of universities, research libraries and organizations, was founded in 1998 as an official project of the Association of Research Libraries. The purpose of SPARC is to provide broad and cost-effective access to peer-reviewed scholarship. SPARC intends to accomplish its goals by education of stakeholders in scholarly communication, advocacy and incubation of alternatives to commercial, toll-access publications.

## **Improvements in technology**

A second reason for reluctance to use electronic journals has to do with difficulty with the technology. Factors having to do with the process of using the electronic medium were studied by Jan Olsen<sup>15</sup>. It was found that while electronic journals offered the convenience of use outside the library, the medium itself was sometimes not suited to the way scholars use journals. The inability to browse physically and underline, visual and intellectual problems associated with scrolling and computer use in general mentioned by Dillon<sup>16</sup> were found to reduce scholars’ use of electronic journals. As more faculty became comfortable with using technology, electronic publication became more acceptable in the academic reward system.

That considerable progress has been made in regard to the technological barriers to electronic journal use is evidenced in a study done by JSTOR and presented at the annual American Library Association conference in 2001<sup>17</sup>. The study of over 3,000 social sciences and humanities faculty at colleges and universities revealed that over 60% use electronic journals, but 56% were not comfortable with the suggestion that electronic archiving could replace hard copy retention.

## **Archiving and Access Issues**

Other important challenges that electronic journals present have to do with archiving. While libraries have traditionally preserved journals when they were received in print, an alleged advantage of electronic transmission is that the journal will be available online, without the costs of space and preservation. However, the scholarly community is increasingly suspicious that electronic publishers are not taking on the responsibility of archiving indefinitely. Indeed, when web journals with their remote and possibly unstable links entered the picture, archiving became a major problem. Must libraries print or store electronically, the full text and all linked material included at the time of publication in order to preserve the intellectual record?

The costs of such an archiving enterprise in terms of staff time and computer storage are not the only financial considerations in the shift to electronic journals. Making appropriate equipment, such as high-speed multimedia computers, available to scholars and teaching them how to use the technology are neither small nor inexpensive tasks. Shifts in technology which may render old material inaccessible may require a periodic refreshing of the archives. The archiving challenge remains unresolved.

Access has also been an issue in the discussion of the acceptability of electronic journals. Many electronic-only journals are not indexed in the well-known indexes. Until recently, even the lists of peer reviewed e-journals did not index individual articles. However, on October 7, 2003 the Directory of Open Access Journals announced the beginning of Phase 2, which would involve the development of a searchable database of the articles in the directory<sup>18</sup>. The database should be operating by Spring 2004. It is to be hoped that this database will be used by scholars as regularly as the traditional indices.

### **Continuing problems with the traditional journal**

Perhaps the most significant benefits of electronic journals have to do with the changes that this medium offers in regard to the nature of the traditional journal article and, possibly, the structure of academic publishing.

Traditionally, a journal article offers only a static summary of the research data, but an electronic journal provides hypertext links to large volumes of related research data or even multimedia sources. In addition, an electronic journal article can function as a dynamic forum, allowing scholars to exchange comments.

Measures of what is actually being used in print journal literature are cumbersome and frequently inaccurate. Libraries rely on call slips and counts by shelvees to determine what is being used in their collections. Academics rely on citation reports to determine whether their work is being used by the scholarly community. Because the technology enables the server to count the number of times an article in an electronic journal is accessed, scholars can have a much more accurate picture of what is being read than what is offered by the traditional reliance on citations.

### **Radical alternatives - scholarly skywriting**

The electronic medium offers more possibilities for enhanced scholarly communication. Stevan Harnad has coined the phrase “scholarly skywriting” to describe the process of ongoing peer commentary on targeted articles in his journals, *Psycoloquy* and *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* (published by Cambridge University Press). His “subversive proposal” is that publishers are superfluous and that



the scholarly enterprise is better served by the speedy, open and less expensive medium of electronic communication. The medium certainly allows for such possibilities as wide review of preprints and hypertext links to large numbers of peer comments.

Harnad<sup>19</sup> has suggested that the expenses involved in publication of peer reviewed journals should be paid by the universities who will save on their library budgets if they are publishing the journals and severing relationships with commercial publishers. Unfortunately, if such a transition ever takes place, what will happen in the interim is not pleasant for researchers. What has happened in some cases is that a peer-reviewed electronic journal is offered to subscribers as free, but the costs are met by charging contributors to have their articles published<sup>20</sup>. This model is used by Biomed Central<sup>21</sup> and the Public Library of Science (PLOS)<sup>22</sup> which launched its first journal (*PLOS Biology*) on October 13, 2003<sup>23</sup>.

While preprint archives cut costs and speed the dissemination of information, the need for quality assurance means that some form of certification is still needed. Peer review has been the generally accepted avenue for certification. The value of traditional peer review is questioned by Arms<sup>24</sup> who points out that in many disciplines the actual dissemination of new ideas takes place at conferences and through self-publication in the Web. Publication in a peer reviewed journal merely adds what universities still require for tenure and promotion.

A suggestion made at a conference at California Polytechnic University in 1997 and recorded by Charles Phelps<sup>25</sup>, that peer review and publication be de-coupled may be the solution. The research could be published on the university's server or a disciplinary server and the reviewer's seal of approval could be affixed later. Funding mechanisms for the maintenance of these servers, as well as for the expenses incurred in peer review, remain to be resolved. In his report on institutional repositories Raym Crow<sup>26</sup> argues that institutional archives are a viable remedy to the problems still posed by the current models of scholarly communication.

## **Copyright and Ingelfinger**

Copyright issues are raised when the suggestion is made that scholars should be allowed to self-archive their work and publish it in a journal. It is questionable whether copyright laws can prevent authors from putting their work in preprint archives and Harnad argues that ways of circumventing publishers' assertions of exclusive rights exist. In other words, the Ingelfinger Rule, "that a journal would not referee or publish research that had been previously published or publicized elsewhere"<sup>27</sup>, cannot be enforced. It has been asserted that the copyright applies only to the final, copy-edited version of the paper, but not to preprints or postprints. Harnad has described how research can be published in a journal and offered on an institutional archive<sup>28</sup>.

## **Radical proposals**

As scholars are beginning to look for ways to break free from the burdens imposed by traditional print journal publication, several radical proposals have emerged. David Rodgers<sup>29</sup> has suggested that the structure of publication will change from one marked by discrete milestones, such as peer review and acceptance, to a continuum more closely resembling the scholarly process. He proposes that the unit of transaction should be the idea, rather than the article. Smith<sup>30</sup> recommends a “deconstructed journal” which does not need a publisher and is based on subject focal points.

Such radical proposals are not without problems. Scholars in developing countries may lack access to the resources to facilitate publication in an open access networked venue. However, at this time more awareness of the economic components of scholarly communication exist. It was announced in April 2002 that the Open Society Institute, as part of its project, the Budapest Open Access Initiative, was prepared to provide funding for authors from developing countries to have their articles published in open access journals<sup>31</sup>.

## **Role of libraries**

It has been suggested that libraries take an assertive role in the changes that are to take place in scholarly communication. As was previously stated, the access rather than ownership model which is the hallmark of licensing puts the onus of archiving and preservation on the publishers, rather than the library. What should the library's responsibilities be?

Frank Quinn<sup>32</sup> asserted that libraries should become publishers of electronic journals. Since the prestige of a journal depends on its standards, clearly, librarians would need the assistance of subject area scholars, whom he calls trustees. The trustees would be responsible for choosing the editor, making policy and setting standards.

Crow, in his paper on institutional repositories recommends that libraries..”. facilitate development of university intellectual property policies, encourage faculty authors to retain the right to self-archive, and broaden both faculty and administration perspectives on these issues, they can be implemented without radically altering the status quo.”<sup>33</sup> The role of libraries is seen as providing the expertise in terms of content management (i.e. formatting, tagging) in order to make material accessible.



## **Archiving, access and preservation in electronic publications and institutional repositories**

The benefits to scholars (rapid dissemination of ideas) and universities (possible savings on library subscription costs) are evident and have even been noted by Young in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*<sup>34</sup>, but the model seems to work best in certain disciplines, such as the sciences, where significant research is taking place in large institutions which are prepared to support such archives. Scientists are aware of the archives and search them whenever they need. Reservations concerning electronic publication continue to exist in that relatively few ejournals are indexed in the major disciplinary indices. A study of indexing of ejournals in the social sciences revealed that considerable work still needs to be done. The article level indexing in the Directory of Open Access Journals is a promising remedy to this problem of lack of accessibility for electronic publication.

When research is published in a repository rather than a journal, access has seemed to be even more doubtful. However, Harnad asserts that “All the papers in these OAI-compliant Eprint, because the Archives are all interoperable, are harvestable and searchable by cross-archive search engines such as: ARC <http://arc.cs.odu.edu/> and cite-base <http://cite-base.ecs.soton.ac.uk/help/index.php3> as if they were in one global virtual archive.”<sup>35</sup>

While the reputation of scientists or the institutions with which they are affiliated serves as some kind of quality assurance in certain fields, especially in the sciences, this situation does not work in the humanities or social sciences, where high quality intellectual work may be as likely to be produced in a state university as in an Ivy League institution. The needs and uses for the electronic environment by humanities scholars are quite different from those of scientists.<sup>36</sup> Preprint archives do not enter the picture at all, but etexts and easy to use hardware and software are needed. It is more likely that scholars in these disciplines will share their work through electronic journals than in institutional repositories.

Although publishers have not traditionally assumed the responsibility for the preservation of literature, in the world of electronic publication their control of access (generally via licensing agreements) may extend to the acceptance of the role of keeper of the literature. In the past, archiving was the responsibility of libraries, but the question today is not about preserving physical materials, but of continuing to make information accessible. Refreshing of technology may be necessary.

Questions about responsibility for archiving, preservation and continued access to information started to arise as libraries began to purchase journals from the aggregators. The model of licensing (access rather than ownership) carries peculiar questions. If a

library cancels a license with a publisher or aggregator, will they still have access to the literature for which they paid licensing fees? Does the vendor actually guarantee that the literature will remain forever accessible? In order to assist librarians in demystifying licenses, the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) has created LIBLICENSE. The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) has also held workshops and created guidelines for licensing agreements. In the United Kingdom the Higher Education Funding Council has been working on model licensing agreements, while under the auspices of the European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations (EBLIDA), the ECUP (European Copyright User Platform) project made some strides on the same issues.

The standards set by these organizations may help in preserving access to journals that are purchased, but when toll barriers are removed and scholars publish in open access journals or institutional repositories, the responsibility for preservation reverts from the commercial entities to the institutions which are supporting the scholars. Libraries may actually benefit from such a shift to electronic journals and archives in that some of the costs of access and archiving may more properly become the responsibility of the computer departments. Librarians, however, must remain wary of surrendering the power to decide what and how material will be preserved to the technology experts.

## **Conclusions**

It appears that strides have been made toward the free dissemination of ideas, but hurdles still exist. Walt Crawford<sup>37</sup> reminds us that, although scholars and scientists may like the idea of free online scholarship, they are not rushing to give up publication in the prestigious journals. The Public Library of Science noted that 30,000 scientists signed a pledge not to publish in or serve on the boards of journals which did not make their content available free within six months of original publication. About 100 scientists have actually followed through on that pledge.

Earlier concerns raised by Luther<sup>38</sup> about librarians' reliance on statistics supplied by publishers regarding ejournal usage are somewhat alleviated by on-going user studies which indicate the growing acceptance of electronic publications by students and faculty. A composite of studies by Tenopir<sup>39</sup> revealed that electronic journals are increasing used for research and as the vehicle for publication by scholars at prestigious universities.

Finally, what is needed is a philosophical shift. Marshall McLuhan pointed out that users of new media frequently think in terms of old media. Electronic publishing is not simply a digital version of a print product; the nature of the activity may change and these changes may signal a radical transformation in scholarly communication. Academic inertia will finally give way. The item of exchange in scholarly com-

munication will become the dynamic idea rather than the static article and impact will become the measure of success.

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