Forcing the Moment to Its Crisis: Thoughts on Pay-Per-View and the Perpetual Access Ideal

Many in the library profession insist on the crucial importance of securing perpetual access rights for acquisitions in electronic formats. In a widely cited article, for example, Jim Stemper and Susan Barribeau assess the current environment for perpetual access and advocate that, when negotiating e-journal acquisitions, libraries "should consider making the lack of perpetual access rights a deal breaker."1 Ross Atkinson goes further, asserting that the inability to secure satisfactory perpetual access provisions represented "the greatest single failure of research libraries in the past decade."2 One outcome of such declarations has been a sentiment among librarians that, while it may not have a discernable impact on services to patrons, not attaining perpetual access provisions is nevertheless a "failure"—it offends the traditional ideal that libraries must preserve information for potential use in the future.

From such a perspective, there is little to recommend the pay-per-view (PPV) model. Here, a library creates an account with a content provider through which authenticated patrons can purchase articles at the library's expense. Despite its payment, the library retains no ownership of the content. What's more, the library lacks even the ability to provide other patrons with access: such rights are generally restricted to the patron who initiated the transaction and no one else. Therefore, PPV is an affront to the perpetual access ideal. It dismisses the concept of the library as what Thomas H. Teper has termed a "memory institution" focused on the long-term preservation.3 To play on Teper's words, the library instead becomes akin to a random-access memory institution primarily committed to meeting patrons' immediate needs without much concern for warehousing information.

But despite PPV's lack of perpetual access provisions, the model has become a hot topic. For example, in addition to this special issue of *Against the Grain*, PPV was the subject of presentations at the 2009 ALA, NASIG, and Charleston Conference.4

The reasons for the model's appeal are easy to understand. Due in part to libraries' widespread acquisitions of "big deal" publisher packages, patrons have come to expect quick and expansive access to journal content. However, budget cuts make it more difficult than ever to meet these expectations. Indeed, because of the large portion of expenditures required to pay for publisher packages, many libraries are no longer able to make do with decreases in their monographic budgets and cancelations of individual subscriptions. Instead, they are being forced to consider breaking up publisher packages. If libraries opt to retain subscriptions to just selected journals within a package, there will be a major decrease in patrons' access: they will continue to have access to individually subscribed journals but lose access to all of the publisher's other journals. Through its radical disaggregation of the content being acquired—transitioning from the publisher's largest unit of content, a "big deal" package, to its smallest unit of content, individual articles—PPV offers a solution whereby libraries can continue to provide a level of access that is comparable to the expansiveness of a package but at what is in many cases a significantly reduced cost.

But PPV is not without its problems—and I am not just referring to the model's lack of perpetual access provisions. For example, Paul Harwood and Albert Prior report that, when the model was trialed in the United Kingdom, the ten participating libraries experienced increased administrative burdens and decreased fiscal control.5 Research that I conducted in the spring of 2009 suggests that these two problems are being experienced to a lesser extent by libraries in the United States.6 However, my research also showed that—while, in general, libraries that have implemented PPV have been pleased with the results—there are other problems, including financial trepidations that the model introduces among patrons and a lack of enthusiasm about and uptake of the model among publishers.

Time will reveal the extent to which the problems associated with PPV are resolved. However, even if PPV in its present form never becomes a dominant acquisition model, its arrival as a point of focus within the profession remains important. It marks a decisive juncture, a point that—to paraphrase T. S. Eliot—forces the current moment in the profession to its crisis.7 Indeed, there is a growing disconnect between patrons' expectations for immediate access to a broad range of content and the adequacy of budgets to meet those expectations through conventional means. PPV offers an unconventional possibility to help bridge the disconnect, but exploring this route means that librarians must compromise their ideals about perpetual access.

Has the time come for such compromises? For many, I suspect the answer may be yes. Budget cuts are forcing librarians to make painful decisions, and, in this context, it seems sensible to explore all avenues for reducing e-resource costs without reducing access—including those that are at odds with the perpetual access ideal. PPV is an important example of such an avenue, but it is not unique. Other ways in which the rejection of the perpetual access ideal can enable libraries to maintain access while reducing costs include:

- cancelling subscriptions to journals with current issues available through full-text aggregators;
- downgrading journal subscriptions to levels with decreased ownership provisions;8 and
- discontinuing membership in archiving initiatives such as the LOCKSS Alliance and PORTICO.

Atkinson deemed such actions to be “failures,” and he is absolutely right. But the fact is that many libraries today are in fail-fail situations. Librarians might reason that it is better to face the possibility of failing anticipated patrons in the future than the certainty of failing real patrons in the present.

Perhaps history will be unkind to those who rebel against the perpetual access ideal. Perhaps decades from now libraries will not have changed much and librarians will sit at reference desks and in cataloging departments lamenting, “If only our precursors hadn’t been so reckless! Because they choose to sacrifice long-term access in favor of short-term savings, there is no affordable way to provide access to many categories of content that patrons need.” That is one possibility. Another possibility is that, in the future, libraries will be utterly transformed. Perhaps the need for many libraries today to secure perpetual access provisions to many categories of content will prove to be an outmoded ritual from what Rick Anderson has called the era of “information scarcity.”9 Even more than today, the future promises to be an era of information abundance. This does not mean that libraries can abdicate their roles as “memory institutions,” but, for many, it may lead to the conclusion that they can be more selective and less stringent about what they decide should be retained in perpetuity. Indeed, in this abundance, it seems probable that, if content is in demand, market forces will make it available at an affordable price.

But, of course, much of the preceding paragraph is speculative. What is certain is that budget cuts are forcing libraries to make difficult decisions about their collections. In this context, the PPV model is appealing, but it violates the ideal of perpetual access. Every library will need to determine the extent to which it compromises this ideal. Those that are more liberal in their compromises may enjoy short-term savings, but their lack of perpetual access provisions may subject them to perils in the future. In contrast, libraries that are uncompromising in their commitment to securing perpetual access provisions can rest assured that their collections will continue to be accessible by future generations. However, they will be investing in the status quo at a time when everything about libraries is changing.

Endnotes

1. Jim Stemper and Susan Barribeau, "Perpetual Access to Electronic Journals: A Survey of One Academic Research Library's Licenses," *Library Resources & Technical Services* 50, no. 2 (2006): 104.

2. Ross Atkinson, "Six Key Challenges for the Future of Collection Development: Introduction for the Janus Breakout Sessions," *Library Resources & Technical Services* 50, no. 4 (2006): 245.

3. Thomas H. Teper, "Current and Emerging Challenges for the Future of Library and Archival Preservation," *Library Resources & Technical Services* 49, no. 1 (2005): 32-39.

4. Beth R. Bernhardt et al., "Pay-Per-View Options: Is Transactional Access Right for My Institution?" Panel presentation sponsored by the ALCTS CCS Electronic Resources Interest Group and given at the ALA annual conference, Chicago, July 11, 2009 (slides and audio available at http://connect.ala.org/node/79063); Lindsey Schell, Katy Ginanni, and Benjamin Heet, "Playing the Field: Pay-Per-View E-Journals and E-Books." Presentation given at the NASIG annual conference, Asheville, North Carolina, June 6, 2009; Adam Murray and Ryan Weir, "Giving the People What They Want: User-Driven Acquisition of Journal Articles." Presentation given at the Charleston Conference, Charleston, South Carolina, November 5, 2009.

5. Paul Harwood and Albert Prior, "Testing Usage-Based E-Journal Pricing," *Learned Publishing* 21, no. 2 (2008): 133-39.

6. Patrick L. Carr, "Acquiring Articles through Unmediated, User-Initiated Pay-Per-View Transactions: An Assessment of Current Practices," *Serials Review* 35, no. 4 (2009). [In press]

7. See line 80 of Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

8. See, for example, the pricing model of the University of Chicago Press: http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/userimages/ContentEditor/1252948133675/2010catalog.pdf.

9. Rick Anderson, "It's Not about the Workflow: Patron-Centered Practices for 21st-Century Serialists," *The Serials Librarian* 51, no. 3/4 (2007): 190.

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