

Hard copy and electronic issues

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Most of us, by now, have advanced into the electronic age at work and realise that we cannot hope to provide a good service to our clients without the use of materials in electronic format. So far, so good. But I am not so sure just yet that the best service can be, or indeed should be, provided by electronic means ONLY. There are many issues to be addressed, such as ease of use by both end user and librarian/IT manager, price (which Nick will also talk about later), training, and accuracy.

When I started writing these notes, I toyed with the idea of calling them "The Revenge of the Luddites", but I realised that such a title may well give the wrong impression. I am all in favour of electronic access, I just don't want to throw away my paper JUST yet. However, given that in the past few months two separate publishers have provided transfer binders which were inadequate in dimensions or fastening devices to cope with the quantity of material being transferred, I may yet change.

The publishers have jumped on the electronic bandwagon with varying degrees of enthusiasm. As we have been asked to try not to be publisher specific in our comments, I won't mention individual publishers but leave it up to your own imagination. The desire to make all information available in electronic form (either on CD or online) has in many cases led to changes in hardcopy publishing. Subscriptions which were previously fortnightly have become monthly to fit in with the electronic schedule. Why? Why can't technology fit in with the use we make of these publications?

Another example, and I'm sorry but you will recognise the publisher instantly, is the number of reprinted Victorian Acts which are appearing. We receive four copies and in the last week we have had three large boxloads including such thrilling Acts as the Coal Mines (Pensions) Act and the Commonwealth Arrangements Act. I am told this is being driven by OCPC's *The Law Today* project, but the cost implications are enormous.

In other cases, too many to enumerate, looseleaf titles have become monstrously out of date. In one or two cases, there were no releases for SIX months, and the reason for this was that the publishers were spending so much time on their electronic versions, the paper version was neglected. This seems to be very common and very wrong. Surely publishers are currently making more out of looseleaves than electronic versions and yet I feel as if I, the long suffering faithful looseleaf customer, am being ignored. I leave it up to each of you to make up your own minds about this.

I'm quite happy for the publishers to make everything available electronically, but NOT at the expense of the paper version. I can see a time in the future when the paper version of certain titles will no longer be available, but until then and until everyone is happy with the replacement, KEEP THE PAPER VERSIONS UP TO DATE! In a similar vein, and again being non-publisher specific, it is not yet time to cease permanent bound volumes of certain report series because supposedly more people have access to them electronically than in paper. If this is going to be a possibility, please consult with some of your users before you jump in and introduce such a policy

Another important issue is that of ease of use. In my particular environment, and I suspect it is not too different in your own, there is a great variety of computer literacy and expertise. Many of my older users are confused by mice. When they double click something by mistake, they have no idea where the icon has gone. Some users are perfectly happy to ignore computers altogether and, especially in my job, I don't feel like forcing them. I should also say that interest in and familiarity with computers does not necessarily appear to be in inverse proportion to age. Some of the more senior judges are the better and more consistent users of electronic materials, and complain loudest when a particular CD or online service is not accessible

Given this, the variety of search software is alarming. There are SO MANY pieces of search software to become familiar with to make good use of everything that is available. It is very complicated for all users. Some of us, I suspect, would like all the publishers to stick to one piece of search software. I cannot in all conscience support that idea, as I don't think it is ever going to happen. In all honesty, I cannot see the publishers cooperating to that extent and it might be counter productive in the long run. If all publishers use only one piece of software, we would then complain that no improvements were being made and we would have nothing on which to base comparisons

Having said this, however, I expect there is one particular publisher screaming at me because I have consciously refused to buy their products on the basis of the software they are using. Life just isn't fair or always rational!

The other option is to provide everything in ASCII format so that we can all use our own inhouse search engines to access the materials. I understand this approach has been taken by a number of New Zealand libraries. The problem with this approach is that not all libraries are large enough to have their own search software, and need a proprietary solution. A choice though would be nice; a user survey even.

What I would really like is for the software to be properly tested before it is released on an unsuspecting public. It seems to me that many times it is we users who notify the publishers of software problems. They normally respond fairly well and quickly, but I think they should know more about what they are sending

us. The problems created by one particular piece of software, especially in relation to network installations, are too numerous to mention. Even the installation programs for this software frequently do not allow us the control or even access they should. At the moment, one network installation is faulty and we can only use work around solutions to install new products.

Nicki has already mentioned the problem of helpdesks. Whenever I speak to someone on a helpdesk, they are invariably friendly and sometimes can help. Sometimes, I am explaining things to them. But what really annoys me is leaving a message on an answering machine and having the call returned some hours later. I realise it is difficult for you publishers, but it is better to speak to a person. If you are going to use an answering machine, make sure there is a roster to check the messages on a regular basis.

Electronic access is meant to make access easier for all, possibly even cheaper for all. As far as I can see, this is still very much a dream. We seem to be paying huge prices for CD-ROM access, largely to cover the publishers' set up or electronic conversion costs. In some cases, the price for the CD-ROM is higher than the paper price, although I am sure that the production costs are considerably lower. I do get the feeling, however unfair it may be, that we the poor users are paying for all these things. If things went according to plan, costs should reduce once everything has been converted to SGML or HTML and output can be produced easily in any medium required. Somehow though I'm not holding my breath waiting for this to happen. Maybe I'm just a cynic.

Another pricing issue is the discounts offered to electronic subscribers on their subscriptions to the paper product equivalents. I'm not sure if this applies to all publishers, but in at least one case, I found out by accident and have had to chase up many times to ensure that the correct discounts were applied. It may well be worth your while enquiring whether you are also entitled to any discounts. After all, they can only say no!

Licence agreements for CD-ROM and online products are also of considerable interest. I know Nick will have something to say about this and the effect it has on academic institutions. There are so many different types of licence. The standard these days, thank God, seems to refer to the number of concurrent users, not the number of people connected to a network as one publisher tried to do a while ago. In my view, we either want licences for a specific number of concurrent users or site/organisation licences. There must be some leeway provided by publishers in their definitions to take account of individual problems, and I must say that in my own particular case, the publishers have so far been fairly sympathetic, but this may reflect on the importance of the Courts' influence. I know a number of firms want national licences for certain products and this again is an aspect which must be addressed.

Some of you (librarians) will possibly think I have let the publishers off too easily. Others (publishers) may think I have been too critical. I hope at least that some of our user concerns have been raised and I look forward to hearing how the individual publishers will address them.