

## **Rising to the challenge and making the connection: electronic serials in public libraries**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports the findings to date of, the *Electronic Serials in Public Libraries* project - a British Library-funded research project which is assessing the impact of electronic serials in terms of the challenges and the opportunities they present. In public libraries, serials are frequently both an under-funded and an under-used resource, making them a prime target for cancellation when library budgets come under pressure. The project has examined the ways in which electronic serials might help to combat these factors.

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper is based on the findings of a research project “Electronic Serials in Public Libraries” (ESPL) and it addresses the broad conference theme “electronic publications and their role in public libraries”. The research is set against a background of initiatives within the public library world, both in the UK and internationally, which are prompting for the expansion of networking in the public library system and for greater exploitation of electronic resources in public libraries. In recent months a number of key reports have been published which have placed electronic resources, including electronic serials, firmly on the agenda. Networking the public library has become a critical issue and there is a growing feeling within the profession that public libraries must consolidate, or perhaps reformulate, their traditional role in order to survive.

Alongside professional developments, there is a growing awareness of, and interest in, electronic information among the general public. This has led to raised expectations and to increasing demands for networked information. High level connectivity will be necessary to ensure that public libraries forge and maintain a role for themselves in the Information Society. Public libraries need to tap into and fuel their users’ interest by providing useful and relevant electronic resources.

The ESPL project focuses on one particular type of electronic publication - the electronic serial. A major motivation for setting up the project was that there was seen to be a need for a full exploration into electronic serials formats and the ways in which they might offer opportunities to public libraries, both in terms of combating shrinking serials budgets and in terms of expanding and updating services.

For the purposes of the ESPL project, the research team have adopted a specific definition of the term “serial”. Here, “serial” refers to newspapers, magazines and e-zines. The reason for using this narrow definition is the desire to focus on those serial resources which are most

used in public libraries and to make a clear distinction between this research and research into scholarly electronic journals. Scholarly electronic journals are growing in number; they are, arguably, becoming increasingly accepted and well-established within the academic community; and, they have been (and continue to be) the focus of numerous interesting research projects. The ESPL project examines instead the opportunities offered by newspapers and magazines in electronic formats. These types of serial tend to be the most important serial types in the UK's public libraries, particularly in small branch libraries whose holdings include only a handful of serials.

More and more newspapers and magazines are appearing in electronic formats, most commonly on CD-ROM or via the Internet. In terms of newspapers (whether international, national, regional or local) there is a growing number of titles available via the Internet. Though these are usually inferior to their printed equivalents, particularly in terms of currency and completeness, there are some excellent sources appearing and the majority are free, at least for now. In addition, a good number of the UK's national (and a handful of local) newspapers are now well-established in CD-ROM format. The UK's public libraries have a solid history of providing newspapers on CD-ROM and they tend to be very popular, well-used resources. In terms of magazines, there is a limited number of English language titles available in CD-ROM format, especially those which fall into the type usually provided by the UK's public libraries. However, magazines are appearing on the Internet in increasing numbers, perhaps due to an anxiety amongst publishers to establish an Internet presence. Most fall into what might be broadly termed the "entertainment and leisure" bracket, but there is an increasing number of more weighty publications, especially in the areas of popular science and business. Unlike newspaper websites it seems that, increasingly, the best magazine sites are charging a subscription. Charging for the more popular magazines seems to be following the pattern established in the scholarly electronic journal market: a "taster" (perhaps contents pages or a couple of key articles) is offered for free; while the full content is a charged service.

The ESPL project is a piece of ongoing research examining the issues which have been charted above, the research is being carried out at Loughborough University and will be completed in June 1998. This paper reports the work so far; the following sections giving more detail about progress and interim findings. The two key phases completed so far are:

- a postal questionnaire survey; and,
- case study visits to four UK public library authorities.

Firstly, the postal questionnaire survey mapped the current provision, exploitation and management of serials in electronic formats in the UK's public libraries. The survey found that public libraries are increasingly providing electronic serials, usually in CD-ROM format, but also through access to the Internet. Secondly, the case study visits investigated the attitudes of librarians to these resources. Issues which were raised by the practitioners during these case studies will be of interest and concern to public librarians everywhere. They included:

- what is the public library's future role for the provision of electronic serials;
- what are library authorities' future plans for the provision of electronic serials;
- how will the barriers relating to electronic formats be overcome;

- what opportunities are electronic formats likely to offer?

Thirdly, the attitudes of users to serials in electronic formats were investigated. The ESPL project has also continually attempted to identify and explore examples of good practice within the UK public library system.

## POSTAL QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY

The questionnaire survey took place during the first four months of the project and had the aim of mapping the subject area. Survey forms were sent out to all of the UK's public library authorities and 55% were returned before the return date, giving a clear picture of national provision. The survey asked questions which would determine the level of provision of electronic serials. Other, more broad-ranging questions, were asked about the size of the authority, the degree of penetration of Internet and OPAC and the provision of printed serials, in order to set the responses in context and make the findings more meaningful.

### *Provision and infrastructure*

The survey found that a large proportion of the UK's public library authorities (64%) do hold electronic serials of some kind. Delving further it was found that:

- the average number of titles held is 6
- titles tend to be accessible at the main library only
- the overwhelming majority of electronic serials held are newspapers in CD-ROM format.

Having stated the rather optimistic figure of 64% (of public library authorities with access to electronic serials), it should be noted that the survey also identified a great disparity between provision at the main library or libraries within an authority, and at branch libraries. In many public library authorities, there seems to be little or no IT infrastructure; branch libraries tend not to be networked and their level of CD-ROM provision and Internet connectivity is usually modest at best. Consequently branch libraries are far less likely to have access to electronic serials than to printed serials (indeed, only 21% of authorities reported access to electronic serials in branch libraries)

Contextual data showed that not only do many authorities have no access to services such as Internet, some also have no access to more basic IT (for example, only 78% have an OPAC system). It is likely that authorities who have a long way to go will not have time for the implementation of very targeted resources such as electronic serials.

### *Measuring use*

Where authorities are providing electronic serials, the use of those serials tends not to be measured in-depth, if at all. Only 37% of the authorities who reported that they have electronic serials were measuring their use and measurements were infrequent and/or informal. Some respondents noted the problems of surveying serials usage, though it was also noted that it can be easier to measure the use of electronic than printed serials. Some authorities reported which electronic serials are most popular with their users. The titles mentioned most often by respondents included the main national newspapers and two major popular magazines, they were: *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Independent*, *The Financial Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *The Economist*, and, *New Scientist*.

## ***Policies***

While nearly half of the respondents (45%) reported that they have a collection development policy, far fewer have a serials provision policy (13%). Many authorities reported that they have policy document in development while others reported that they tend to work to informal priorities instead of formal policies. In this new area of concern for public libraries, there is obviously much work to be done.

## ***Concerns***

Respondents were also asked to comment on the opportunities and threats they believe to be presented by electronic serials. Many and diverse issues were raised, the main ones being:

- *lack of funding* - predictably enough, the most frequently mentioned problem was lack of funding, which had reportedly had an impact both on the purchase of both printed and electronic serials titles and on the ability of libraries to purchase the hardware which is required to access electronic serials;
- *licenses* - the need to negotiate licenses and subscriptions packages to electronic titles was of concern, particularly in terms of accessing backfiles if the subscription is cancelled to ensure library users will be able to gain access;
- *copyright* - the complications of managing copyright in the electronic environment was something with which respondents felt uncomfortable;
- *durability of electronic formats* - doubts were expressed about the shelf-life of CD-ROM and also about the potential problems of accessing data held in formats which will be rendered obsolete by new technological developments;
- *archiving on the Internet* - respondents expressed concern that no body is taking responsibility for the archiving of serial titles provided via the Internet, the long-term access to these titles was putting some respondents off this mode of access;
- *networking and hardware* - the recurrent costs of hardware and the increasing need for good in-house IT support were of concern to many respondents.

## ***Future plans***

In general, the provision of electronic serials in public libraries does seem to be increasing; a number of authorities reported plans to expand provision and access, by providing more CD-ROMs and through increased connectivity to the Internet. Others are keen to explore provision, but are realistic about the need to maintain printed formats too. However, for many public library authorities electronic serials simply did not feature in their future plans.

## **CASE STUDIES**

In order to expand on the broad picture gained through the questionnaire survey, the research has also included a number of case studies, carried out in public library authorities in the UK. The case study authorities were selected from the respondents to the questionnaire survey with the aims of selecting authorities where electronic serials were already being provided and also of selecting a range of different types of authority. Time constraints meant that just four visits could be made. The final choice comprised:

- a large County

- a small Metropolitan Borough
- a London Borough
- a Scottish authority

The questionnaire survey had identified various attitudes and approaches to the provision of electronic serials and the authorities also reflected a variety of experience. In particular, while they were all implementing electronic resources, including electronic serials, each authority was at a different stage of advancement. The case study phase of the project took place during months five to nine of the project, and the data collected during that phase are currently being analysed. This paper therefore sets forward the initial impressions gained from these data.

### ***Methodology***

The project researcher made extended visits to each authority in order to study their approaches to the provision, the use, and the management of electronic serials. The visits were made over a few days in order that the “flavour” of each authority came across and also to allow for visits to not just the authority’s main central library but also to one or two of the branch libraries where electronic serials were being provided.

During the case study visits the researcher carried out various tasks. Firstly, practical details relating to the implementation of IT were observed and a note was made of any details which were of particular relevance to the provision of electronic serials, such as:

- the integration (or not) of electronic serials with existing serials services;
- signing and guiding;
- menus and interfaces;
- any printed or on-line instructional material provided; and,

A note was also made of other peripheral details which might impact on the use of services, such as sound levels, lighting, furniture and the ergonomics of the workspace.

Secondly, the researcher carried out semi-structured interviews with both senior and front-line staff. Senior staff were asked to verify the data they had provided in the questionnaire survey (especially where details had changed - not uncommon in this fast moving area) and to provide more in-depth details about the specifics of provision in their authority. Front-line staff were interviewed in order to ascertain their expectations of, resistance to and, hopefully, enthusiasm for, electronic resources in general and their thoughts about electronic serials in particular.

Thirdly, the researcher spent time in each authority observing the users of the service. Each time a library user came into contact with an electronic serial on CD-ROM, or if they used the Internet, they were asked if they were willing to answer a few short questions about their impressions.

### ***Observation***

In each of the authorities visited, the process of observing the provision and use of IT resources proved to be very useful. Physical impressions, including an observation of the ways in which staff and users approached electronic resources immediately gave an

impression of the prevailing attitudes. These initial impressions were very much borne out by the comments of the staff and users interviewed (these comments will be described in more detail later).

On first impressions, there were only a handful of easily identifiable trends in the practical implementation of electronic serials. Variety of approach was more notable than similarity of approach. Having said that, one trend (perhaps a rather predictable one) was that IT developments were further advanced at the central library in all of the authorities visited. IT also tended to be better co-ordinated and supported at the central site than in the branch libraries. Another trend was that, in none of the authorities visited had the connection between electronic serials and printed ones been made explicit. In most of the libraries visited, IT services had not been located near the printed serials collection. Also there was no signing along with the printed serials collection to alert users to the existence of an electronic equivalent for some titles. However, one authority was taking a step towards integrating printed and electronic serials by including a reference to, for example, the CD-ROM version of a newspaper, in the serials listing.

Predictably, the menus and interfaces facing the end-users of IT in the four authorities visited varied considerably, these could be explained by simple differences of approach and of "corporate image" but the differences had an impact beyond this. Two authorities were simply using Windows icons rather than a menu, especially where PCs were multi-purpose (usually being used for both CD-ROM and Internet, and often for much more besides). It was noticeable that those library users who were new to IT tended to be a little phased by this approach. In the other two authorities fairly sophisticated menus were used and these appeared to be far more popular with users and seemed to create fewer enquiries. The creation of a friendly menu is made much easier where a PC is dedicated to a single use

It was noticeable that none of the authorities had created an Internet homepage which organised the content of the Internet and signalled the existence of serials resources. Instead authorities were either using a search engine as a homepage (in all the libraries visited this was either Yahoo! or AltaVista), or they were obliged to use a corporate homepage, where the library was lost amongst lots of other council services.

All the authorities provided instructional material next to PCs or from an enquiry desk. The style and level of content of these varied enormously, some focused on CD-ROM instructions, while others offered an introduction (in all cases very brief) to the Internet browser.

The central site tended to have the most well-designed workspaces, with computer desks and appropriate seating. In almost all cases branch libraries were the "poorer cousin" and were using existing furniture, which had not been designed for IT. Branch libraries were even more likely than the central library to present peculiar difficulties in terms of restrictive buildings without space that was suitable to the provision of IT.

### *Interviews with staff*

The fears and enthusiasms expressed during interviews with both senior and front-line staff were in keeping with the extra comments made by respondents to the questionnaire (and which were outlined earlier). In all cases, senior staff were keen to point out that, while

electronic serials were an important resource, they were certainly not treated as a special resource within the context of electronic resources in general. Even the more advanced of the authorities visited were providing electronic serials on a scale which is relatively modest, especially when compared to provision in academic libraries.

From the evidence of the interviews it seems that the extent to which senior managers and service planners are “taking the front-line staff along with them” has a direct impact on the quality of the service being provided. In one of the authorities there was a degree of enthusiasm among the front-line staff for electronic resources, but this enthusiasm had been tempered by scepticism about the way in which the resources were being introduced. As a result the staff were rather wary, feeling that they had not been given the skills to support them, particularly in branch libraries. In another authority front-line staff were very enthusiastic, but again this had been tempered, this time by fears about lack of funding and the perception that the authority was getting left behind in what one person described as a “race” to have the biggest and best electronic resources. The staff in this authority had a tendency to keep quiet about the (admittedly modest) resources they did have, noting that they did not feel able to “shout about” services like the Internet as long as they lack the IT skills required to support them. In a third authority, there was a slightly different picture, the resources were very well-liked and well-supported by the front-line staff, but there was a general consensus that electronic resources were very demanding on staff time and so there were some misgivings about the possibility of supporting the services as they develop.

There was a notable difference in attitudes to electronic serials on CD-ROM and those available over the Internet. While there was widespread acceptance of serials on CD-ROM; attitudes to the Internet were very mixed. Many of those interviewed were enthusiastic about the Internet, but stereotype and prejudice about its nature prevailed. There was concern about the quality of information on the Internet, the reliability and sustainability of the medium; more than one person remarked that the Internet is like an amusement arcade or satellite television; with lots of advertising, lots of trivial content, and not much else. However, attitudes were markedly more positive in one authority; the staff were more convinced about the potential usefulness of the Internet. Even here, though, there were concerns. Some were convinced that the content that is “worth having” will eventually be charged for; there was also a real concern that staff are already struggling to maintain an awareness of the resources available on the Internet, and that this situation will worsen.

As mentioned previously, no authorities were alerting their users to the existence of serials on the Internet in any formalised way. Senior managers noted that there is simply no time for them or their staff to create a listing of serial sources on the Internet and maintaining such a directory would certainly be an impossibility. Front line staff noted that they do point users towards serials resources in the Internet occasionally, but that they have difficulty keeping their awareness of such resources up-to-date.

### ***Interviews with users***

Most users approached during the case study visits were happy to answer a few questions about their impressions. They were generally very impressed by their library’s initiatives in implementing IT, but were keen to see more and better services too. The pattern of use varied depending on the service being used. Where a library was providing newspapers on CD-ROM, they were always among the most-used of all the CD-ROM titles provided. They

tended to be used in a very purposive way, by library users who needed to locate a specific piece of information. These users were not particularly concerned about the way in which they located the information, but they were universally appreciative of the advantages of electronic formats, in particular the ability to perform keyword searches and the removal of the need to browse through old printed newspapers.

Internet users were very different. The first difference was that only a small number of them had used the Internet specifically to access serials. A handful had come across magazine articles while searching for other things or during a general keyword search; the number of users who had deliberately accessed a newspaper or magazine site was in single figures in each authority visited. That said, those users who had accessed an electronic serial via the Internet were generally fairly impressed by them, mainly by the currency of the information they found. For example, one user reported regularly accessing a French newspaper for daily headlines.

## CONCLUSIONS

The research to date has found that there are issues relating to the provision of electronic serials in public libraries which will be of concern to practitioners everywhere. As more and more newspapers and magazines appear in electronic format public libraries will have much to gain from moving into this new service area. However, the wide-ranging concerns about implementation which have been raised during case studies remain.

The final phases of the project will bring together the findings of this investigation, mapping the benefits to be gained and the pitfalls public libraries are likely to face, indeed, which they are already facing in many cases. The attitudes of the library staff who are currently supporting electronic serials is a major part of this study and the findings have suggested that there are serious problems with training and confidence building; if there is a single lesson to be learnt, it is that nothing can be achieved without "taking the front-line staff along" and ensuring they are given the skills to support new services as they develop.

The benefits of providing electronic serials on CD-ROM as an information tool have been demonstrated and these resources are already popular with users, but doubts have been expressed by both library staff and users about the usefulness of the Internet as a delivery mechanism for serials.

At the moment, provision is marred by a variety of approach; for example, there is no single menu system, even (in some cases) within a single authority. While Internet-based electronic serials are considered to be an add-on service, with little integration between them and their printed counterparts, there is unlikely to be wide acceptance of them by users and they are unlikely to be heavily used.

The remaining phases of the ESPL project include a focus group seminar for library managers and serials managers; allowing for a full debate of the issues surrounding the provision of electronic serials formats. At the completion of the project in June 1998, a research report will be produced, to include:

- a full analysis of the research findings;
- comparative economic models for printed and electronic serials formats;
- an evaluative directory of electronic serials;

- guidelines for the application of performance indicators to electronic serials.

The many interesting issues which the research is throwing up will be charted against the examples of best practice which have been encountered along the way.

On a final note, the research for the Electronic Serials in Public Libraries project has indicated a number of areas where further research is required. Many of the practitioners interviewed expressed concerns about the implications of the European-wide Year for Lifelong Learning in 1996 which prompted public libraries to look towards the need for providing new types of information, especially those which support adult independent learners and distance learners. The shift towards viewing public libraries as places for private academic study, means that the effective provision of scholarly serials might be of increasing importance in the future. During the research the opinions of public library users have been sought, but only in a limited way; there may be lessons to be learnt from the more extensive user studies which have accompanied scholarly electronic journals projects. The lack of coherent policies for serials and for electronic resources in the public library sector is of cause for concern; the whole area of policy and coherence of provision, and the effect on the quality of the services being provided needs further investigation.