

# The Uncertainty of Electronic Journals

By Daniel Goldstein (University of California, Davis)

Electronic journal subscriptions are convenient, but they may also put the integrity of research library collections at risk. Electronic subscriptions were initially available as (low-cost or free) adjuncts to the traditional print subscriptions, and some, like *Isis*, are still offered this way. However a number of other subscription models are emerging that change this relationship. In recent years, some libraries access most or all of a publisher's electronic output with a single license. To varying degrees, these agreements make the print edition an optional adjunct to the electronic version of a title. Still other journals are included in third-party electronic packages that libraries subscribe to independent of any subscription to a journal itself. *The Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences and Technology & Culture*, available in Johns Hopkins University's Project Muse, are both examples of this type of electronic access. When, as now, research libraries must cut costs, these newer licensing models press us to cancel print versions of journals in favor of their digital counterparts. After this year you will not find current paper copies of *The Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences, Technology & Culture* or many other history of science journals in my library; they will be available only in electronic form.

So, why is this a problem? First, the electronic edition may not be identical to the print "version of record." Many of the components of a journal, including cover art, advertising, prefaces, notes and so forth may not be included. Additionally, digitized illustrations are frequently of much lower quality than their printed counterparts. It's often much easier to read a printed journal than a computer screen.

Second, when a library acquires a particular issue of a journal on paper, it can put the journal on the shelf, and there it sits, essentially a permanent, stable part of the collection. By contrast, the long-term availability of an electronic journal is more uncertain. The most basic problem is that libraries lose control over their collections. Electronic subscriptions provide access to journals, but libraries are generally not allowed to, nor do they want to, copy those journals onto their own computer servers. Here at the University of California (and elsewhere, I am sure), we sign licenses that guarantee perpetual access to our subscriptions, but no one seems quite sure what exactly that entails. In fact, a recent study sponsored by the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers has found that only "52 per cent

of commercial and 45 per cent of not-for-profit publishers have formal provisions for long-term preservation." In the best of circumstances, long-term access to electronic-only editions of journals is therefore dependent on an outside organization, a university press, or a commercial publisher maintaining an archive.

Even if we assume that these varied institutions are really in it for the long haul, we cannot assume that they will maintain these archives unchanged. While Project Muse has a seemingly iron-

clad policy that any material once posted will always be available, other organizations on which we must depend make no such guarantees. Elsevier offers one example of particular interest to historians of science. The current policy of this publisher of scientific journals states that it may, rarely, remove articles entirely from its database. The bases for such action – including article content that might be defamatory or which "if acted upon, might pose a serious health risk" – may be responsible and reasonable from a publisher's point of view but they are clearly not desirable for historians.

Libraries need to retain control of their collections, whether on paper or in electronic form; but are they ready for the job and what will it involve? Librarians and publishers are discussing these questions, but good, long-term solutions will require the people at the heart of the matter – the writers and readers – to join in. Authors should talk with their publishers and insist that they produce truly identical print and electronic versions of their journals. Researchers should talk with librarians about how we use journals and what our needs and expectations are. Only in this way are we likely to survive this "transition" to digital formats with our collections intact and our ability to use them enhanced.

*Documents cited: John Cox and Laura Cox, "Scholarly Publishing Practice: The ALPSP report on Academic Journal Publishers' Policies and Practices in Online Publishing, June 2003. Executive Summary at <http://www.alpsp.org/news/sppssummary0603.pdf> (visited, July, 29, 2003). Elsevier Policy on Article Withdrawal. [http://www.elsevier.com/homepage/about/ita/editors/newsitems/withdrawal\\_policy.htm](http://www.elsevier.com/homepage/about/ita/editors/newsitems/withdrawal_policy.htm) (visited July, 29, 2003).*

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