

# ON THE DUBLIN CORE FRONT

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Transforming Thyself:  
Serials Agents in a Digital World

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*"You know you're going bad when your wife takes you aside and tries to change your batting stance – and you take her advice."* – Thomas Boswell

## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the impact of electronic resources on the suite of services provided by serials agents. The article describes the changing needs of academic libraries in this new environment, and the ways in which serials agents can repurpose themselves to remain a cornerstone of serials management. A white paper by R2 Consulting is referenced for its insights into the expectations and requirements of academic libraries. Brief statements by two Otto Harrassowitz executives are included.

## KEYWORDS

serials agents; serials vendors; electronic resources; e-resources; Otto Harrassowitz; Friedemann Weigel; Dena Schoen

**M**y infant daughter is fascinated by the cartoon Transformers Energon™. Each weekday morning, she sits comfortably in my lap, transfixed by the way these robots meld into turbo-charged vehicles before heading off for their next great adventure. When my wife emerges from her shower and assumes babysitting duty, she changes the channel from Cartoon Network™ to the local news, which, she informs me, is just as stimulating to our three-month old. Silently I disagree, recognizing in my daughter's eyes a disinterest for the Nikkei average and the five-day forecast. The fate of Optimus Prime and his fellow Autobots is much more important to her. Some things a father just knows.

## CHANGING TIMES, CHANGING NEEDS

Like the Autobots, serials agents need to adapt to new challenges. The shift from print to electronic journal subscriptions so many academic libraries are in the midst of effecting suggests that traditional print-based services provided by agents are no longer sufficient. Writing in the inaugural issue of *Technical Services Quarterly* in 1983, Philip Greene, Vice President and General Manager of EBSCO Subscription Services, described his vision of serials vendors in the future: "Subscription agencies will ultimately depend on their ability to anticipate library needs, and to support the necessary research to make their electronic interfaces useable, practical and cost effective" (Greene, 1983). He concluded his piece by contending that in the next ten to twenty years agents will become even more

important to libraries than in the past. He was right, but only recently has the truth of Greene's prophecy been legitimized.

Shortly after electronic versions of print journals debuted in libraries in the mid-1990s, serials agents began to feel a pinch. Rather than continue to pay an agent fees for services largely not rendered with e-journals, some libraries chose to purchase directly from publishers, who, then as now, are more than happy to circumvent the intermediary. Moreover, consortia deals for e-resource packages often force libraries to deal directly with publishers, thus further marginalizing the agent's business. This model of direct e-journal purchasing, however, as was discovered many years ago with print journals, is unsustainable. Rick Lugg and Ruth Fischer describe the conflict well in their excellent white paper, "*Agents in place: Intermediaries in e-journal management*" (Lugg, 2003).

*As journals became available electronically, library-agent-publisher relationships were disrupted. Publishers saw and seized an opportunity to sell content directly to libraries. Libraries formed consortia (in this context, essentially "buyin in order to negotiate lower prices with publishers....Having been excluded from a significant role in e-journal distribution, subscription agents were in danger of becoming marginalized.*

Lugg and Fischer use the phrase, "were in danger of becoming marginalized" instead of "are in danger of becoming marginalized," a semantic difference equivalent to a patient being in serious condition rather than in critical. By no means, however, are serials agents in perfect health, as evidenced by RoweCom's bankruptcy in 2003. Nonetheless, agents have begun to recognize the changing needs of libraries in this electronic age, and to repurpose themselves to accommodate these needs. My own library, which I can't imagine is terribly different from those in peer institutions, had for years purchased certain e-resources directly from publishers. We did this primarily to save the service charge that would be assessed by our serials agent if we had placed the order through them. Since traditional services, for instance claiming, are not being provided by the agent for electronic journals, we had decided the service fee wasn't worth the singular advantage of centralized invoicing. Given that over 40% of my library's serials budget is spent on e-resources, the money saved by purchasing directly from publishers was not insignificant.

## **NEW ROLES FOR SERIALS AGENTS**

This salvaged money, however, is no longer worth the expense of brokering deals with an ever-growing array of online suppliers. In fact, this practice is a return to the ineffective direct dealing libraries had to perform before serials agents helped to consolidate journal purchasing. Libraries still need subscription agents; we just need different services from them. The Lugg/Fischer article cited above offers ideas from the perspective of consultants on what these services should be. A recent Haworth Information Press monograph, *E-Serials Collection Management: Transitions, Trends, and Technicalities* (Fowler, 2004), provides the perspectives of serials agents (Harwood, 2004) and librarians (Loghry, 2004). These commentators share similar thoughts on the new roles that should be served by serials agents. Some of these new roles include:

**Publisher pricing alerts:** An increasingly popular publisher activity is the announcement of new pricing models late in the serials-renewal year. Often these announcements occur in summer, and announcements from multiple publishers in a given year are not uncommon. Consolidating these new price models would help libraries understand and react to them appropriately.

**License negotiation:** Some agents negotiate licenses with publishers on behalf of libraries. These agents know what terms are unacceptable to libraries, and can argue for more agreeable terms, or at least notify libraries of issues that they'll find objectionable in the license. Such license negotiating and parsing saves a great deal of staff time. A small number of libraries have provided their agents with an institutionally-crafted license, which the agent provides the publisher at the point of purchase. Although this is a newer practice, it has potential for educating publishers as to terms libraries find acceptable.

**Registration services:** When libraries first received access to a handful of electronic journals by way of maintaining a print subscription, it wasn't a hardship for a serials staff member to register for access. Today, however, with most academic libraries having access to hundreds or thousands of e-journals, registering for such access is a considerable time expense. As with setting up print subscriptions, most serials agents can perform the labor-intensive work of setting up electronic subscriptions for libraries. Agents can pass along IP ranges to publishers, respond to licensing issues (as noted above), and procure necessary administrative metadata for libraries.

**Troubleshooting:** Service interruptions cause discontent for library users and, quickly thereafter, library staff. Agents can be a library's help desk; they can perform the task of contacting the publisher or e-resource supplier to troubleshoot the problem. Although this mediated approach to troubleshooting may seem inefficient, direct "hotline" relationships between publisher and agents can actually mean a speedier resolution to the problem. As with all of these new roles, relying on a serials agent to correct access problems alleviates library staff from this time-consuming task, often without compromising service for the end-user.

## WHAT'S IT WORTH?

If agents are to take on these new responsibilities for e-journals, libraries must expect to pay something beyond typical service fees. After all, agents still need to maintain their print subscription service infrastructure while also applying many print-related services to the e-journal arena (ordering, invoicing, renewals, etc.). Many cash-strapped libraries will find it difficult to pay higher fees to agents than they do presently, even for services that could save hundreds of hours per year in staff time. Consortia-purchased collections and the proclivities of a handful of large publishers aside, it will no doubt become necessary for libraries to entrust all subscriptions to agents as the majority of subscriptions maintained by libraries migrate from print to electronic.

## TRANSFORMING THYSELF

One serials agency that has adapted to the changing needs of libraries in this digital age is Otto Harrassowitz. The German company, founded in 1872, has recently overhauled its infrastructure in order to provide many new and desirable services to libraries. Friedemann Weigel, Managing Partner, Information Systems Director, describes Otto Harrassowitz's transformation (Weigel, 2004):

*With the advent of e-resources, disintermediation was the anticipated future: no libraries needed, no agencies needed. Largely enriched intermediation, however, is the reality for Harrassowitz today. E-resources represent a far greater variety in product characteristics, licensing and access patterns, and also in pricing options than print ever did before. This combined with an unprecedented pace of change and development in information production and distribution creates the perfect field for*

*intermediaries and provides ample opportunities to add considerable value to e-resources and their management in the supply chain. HERMIS 3.0, Harrassowitz Electronic Resource Management Information Solutions, is a rich suite of services for e-resources, combining human resources, data feeds for library systems and direct system support through OttoSerials 3.0. It addresses a wide range of functionalities covering the entire library workflow and helps to manage e-resources more efficiently. HERMIS 3.0 is substantial but not final. Future versions of HERMIS will specifically address upcoming industry standards, licensing management, immediate activation and other issues brought to the attention by our development partners.*

Dena Schoen, Regional Manager, North America, describes libraries' desire for new services (Schoen, 2004):

*Customers in all sizes and types of libraries attest to the need for more service from agents, not less. Staff cuts and generational changes have resulted in libraries having fewer people to do more work and less on-site expertise than in previous eras. Innumerable inefficiencies have sprouted like mushrooms as libraries cope with handling "traditional print" titles and new, ever-changing e-formats. Staff in acquisitions, collection management and IT all cry out for new services and data feeds from agents.*

## **CONCLUSION**

There is a role for serials agents in this new digital information world. Most libraries are not interested in returning to a time when they dealt directly with publishers; they're not staffed to handle that volume of transactions. Despite the increase in consortium-purchased resources that often eliminate the agent intermediary altogether, there are still countless other electronic and, dare I forget, print subscription needs libraries have. The serials agent renaissance has begun.

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