

# Faculty Views of the Transition from Print to Electronic Formats

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports on the views of over sixty social science faculty at the University of Michigan regarding their preferences for using print or electronic forms of scholarly journals. The data are based on the transcripts of structured in-depth interviews conducted in the fall of 2001 and winter of 2002.

## **Research Question**

For the nation's leading research libraries, digitization of scholarly resources has resulted in an ever-growing budgetary commitment to purchasing content twice: once in traditional print format and then again in an electronically accessible format. The expenses incurred by these duplicate format purchases cannot be borne by libraries indefinitely. The marginal costs for adding digital resources over and above print copies will continue to increase to a point where they impinge on the acquisition of new and needed unique content in one or the other format. In fact, this is already occurring in most libraries. Unchecked, this will inevitably undermine the mission of research libraries to acquire

in-depth specialized scholarly content in support of research and instruction.

Beyond the fiscal pressures engendered by dual format acquisitions, libraries have been increasingly concerned with the space resources required to maintain and archive the still burgeoning volume of scholarship produced in print form. Electronic access offers substantial opportunities for freeing up existing stacks and storage space, but realizing this library and campus benefit will require significant changes to policies and procedures governing the acquisition, storage, and archiving of scholarly resources.

In theory, subscriptions to print serials that are also available digitally could be cut to save acquisitions dollars. Likewise, backfiles of these or other serial titles could be relocated to storage or even discarded if suitable access to digital versions or facsimiles were available. The implementation of any such changes to collection management practices, however, are best made in areas where library constituents will be the least inconvenienced and the most receptive. In order to identify such areas, it is necessary to de-

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termine and understand the key concerns of library users regarding the use of electronic serials and any proposed reduction to print copies. Toward this end, the University of Michigan University Library has undertaken a study of faculty use of the journal literature in three social science disciplines. The primary goal of this research was to identify the characteristics of disciplinary areas and/or groups of users whose productivity will be least affected by a reduction in access to print serials.

### **Methodology**

The Michigan study explores faculty thoughts related to the above questions through in-depth, structured interviews with sixty faculty members in anthropology, economics and sociology. These disciplines were selected because they offer considerable intra- and inter-disciplinary variation in research methods. The interview population comprised tenured and tenure-track faculty who varied by subject specialty, methodological orientation, rank, race, and gender—factors that might reasonably be thought to influence format preference. All interviews were conducted in the fall of 2001; the tapes then transcribed and entered into a qualitative data analysis system (NVivo) for both thematic and detailed analysis.

### **Findings**

Viewed at its most aggregated level, the Michigan interviews show a high degree of faculty acceptance of electronic access to current journal literature, and backfiles as experienced through JSTOR. Overall, over 82 percent of faculty respondents expressed a preference for electronic access, either exclusively or with some limited print backup. Of the remaining faculty, eight (12%) expressed a preference for access to both formats while 4 (6%) could be characterized as preferring print only. The characteristics and specific reservations of the latter “print-centric” respondents were reported in an earlier analysis of a subset of these data.<sup>1</sup> Generally speaking, factors of cohort and research methodology appear to be common elements underlying the reservations to electronic access expressed by these respondents. The stated concerns of this print-centric group include environmental sensitivities, possible data loss of digital formats, and a loss of connection to an original manifestation of a work. The faculty expressing concerns about losing access to print

were more likely approaching their work from a historical perspective, more likely using quantitative methods, and more likely studying non-western societies.

Perhaps the more generalizable outcomes of this research are the positive accounts of how scholarship is facilitated by electronic access. The faculty interviewed, without regard to discipline, cite the convenience of 24/7 access to information, searchability across large bodies of content, and increased mobility of information as useful improvements brought about by the proliferation electronic journals. Some also noted the instructional benefits of electronic access to scholarly information, because of the perceived preference of students for working with content in this form. A few researchers also noted that electronic access to journal information supported new forms of research, impossible in a print-based environment. Most, however, were using electronic versions of journals in much the same way they had used print, including a significant tendency to print out articles of interest.

Faculty respondents were asked to consider the choices faced by libraries of subscribing to fewer titles in both print and electronic formats or more titles in one or the other format. Most recognized the difficulty of this choice facing libraries, and in fact had trouble thinking about a collection of hundreds of journal titles for a single discipline. Overall, respondents more or less split between the need to maintain dual format collections and encouraging a more aggressive transition to electronic-only collections. Perhaps most notable was not so much the answers offered, but the difficulty expressed in making the choice. As one interviewee said, “I’ll leave that to the bureaucrats.” Not surprisingly, nobody suggested that a library should consider print-only collections in the current environment. On a related point, respondents were asked questions about the management of their personal subscriptions given campus availability of electronic versions of journals. Most indicated that they would retain some if not all of their personal subscriptions, though clearly some felt relieved of the obligation to store back issues at home or in their office.

Finally, our interviews elicited an assessment of the respondents’ comfort with computing and their perceptions of the computer facility of colleagues and

students. While there is a wide range of computer contact for all but a few faculty working in these disciplines, there were frequent expressions of insecurity about the degree to which respondents had fully grasped the availability and effective use of digitally accessible library resources.

#### Notes

1. Janet P. Palmer and Mark Sandler. "What Do Faculty Want?," *Library Journal NetConnect*, 1/15/03 (<http://libraryjournal.reviewsnews.com/index.asp?layout=article&articleid=CA266432&publication=libraryjournal>).