Electronic Resources in Practice: Considerations when Selecting Online Content

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Introduction

Libraries increasingly offer electronic resources, such as online books, journals, databases, streaming music and videos, digital image collections, and audio books, as part of their collections. Some considerations for selecting electronic resources are the same as those for other formats. The quality of content, whether or not it fills a gap or need in the collection, budgetary considerations, library user requests, and whether or not it is considered a core title in a given discipline are all factors to consider when selecting any material for a library's collection, regardless of format. Just as there are certain considerations particularly relevant to a print book, like quality of the paper and binding or the comprehensiveness of the index, there are a multitude of format-specific considerations to take into account for online resources.

Content Considerations

Platform and User Interface

The user interface is very important for electronic resources. Amazing content on a platform that is difficult to search and navigate is not going to provide a positive user experience; patrons can be frustrated or discouraged by a challenging discovery interface. Trials for electronic resources are especially helpful in evaluating the user experience of a platform. Many content providers will allow a limited trial for evaluation purposes, so take advantage of that opportunity to use the resource as a researcher would. Take a look at the search options available, what search results look like, available filtering options, and how users actually navigate to full text content. Is there other not-necessary-but-nice-to-have functionality? What citation features are available, and are research services like EndNote, Zotero, or RefWorks supported? Can users save and export searches or results lists?

Take stock of how it feels navigating the platform. Is it intuitive and user friendly, or are you confused about where to start or go next? Try it out on a desktop, tablet, and phone or other smaller mobile device and see how it works for people using different types of devices. We may assume that platforms are mobile friendly, but they may not be, and it may be something to consider for your user population. You may also want to look at any help or how-to links available to help users who may be stuck. Many larger providers conduct extensive user testing on their content platforms, so these guides or FAQs can be helpful for finding out what features are especially well used as well as common stumbling blocks they found.

Web Accessibility

Accessibility is a primary concern with electronic resources, and it is important to ensure that online content is accessible to everyone who may be using our libraries. Ask about the platform's accessibility features, such as whether it is optimized to support screen readers, whether it can be navigated using keyboard only if needed, or whether closed captioning or full transcripts are available for video and audio files. Many large content providers have invested in ensuring their products are compliant with current web accessibility standards (such as Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act and W3C Web Accessibility Initiative Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0), and have provided information about their efforts on their websites (United States Access

Board, n.d.; Henry, 2018) . For smaller or more niche content providers, it may be necessary to ask about accessibility and how their content can be accessed by those with visual, motor, auditory, or cognitive impairments.

Content Formats
With online resources, it is important to look at what content formats are available. For example, with online text, is content available only in HTML or are PDFs also available? For streaming media, can content only be streamed directly from the platform itself, or if it can be played externally, is the content in a file format for which a special player or other program is required to play it? Can content be saved outside of the platform in any way, such as through emailing, downloading, or exporting to a personal cloud service like DropBox or Google Drive?

Coverage and Currency
Online resources can be very fluid, with content being added, removed, or updated. How often is content updated? Is the content from a defined, closed-ended time period, or will it be updated to include current publications or other content as they come out?

Administrative Considerations

Branding
Unlike with physical materials, where it is fairly obvious to library users that those materials are provided by the library, the relationship between the library and online content can be a bit more ambiguous to researchers. Patrons are directed to platforms that look and function differently from the library's other online presences, each with their own branding and name. In order to make the connection between the online content being provided and the fact that library is making that resource available to its users, many providers allow for the library to include its own branding, logo, or a statement indicating that access to this content is made available by the library's subscription or purchase. Find out what branding options are available, and whether the library has appropriate image files to share with the vendor for branding purposes, if needed.

Accessing Content
For purchased or subscription based content, it is important to find out what authentication methods are supported. Does the platform support IP recognition or is a username and password required? Is remote access through proxy or login credentials possible, or do users have to be in the library to access content? Is single sign on supported, allowing users to authenticate using credentials that they use to access their library account, or other systems on campus or in the library?

There are many ways libraries can choose to provide access to online content, whether through links to resources on the library's website, bibliographic records in the online catalog or discovery interface, through other online databases using a link resolver, and others. When deciding how best to provide access to online content to patrons, there are a number of considerations.

If the library uses a MARC record delivery service, like 360 MARC, or obtains records for online collections through a bibliographic utility, like Worldshare Collection Manager, are

records available from that service? If not, can bibliographic records be obtained from the vendor, is there a cost, and are they worth it? Are the records of adequate quality to be added to the catalog? If vendor or batch loading records from another service are not an option, how will researchers be directed to content? Will a link to the collection be added to the library's website? Will cataloging or metadata personnel be tasked with cataloging records for the collection or individual titles? Who will be responsible for ensuring access points are current, URLs are working, and that catalog records are added, removed, and updated as needed? If the library uses a link resolver, like Proquest SFX or Ex Libris 360 Link, is that supported by the platform?

Assessing Usage
With any type of resource, assessing usage and value to the library's users is an important task. For online resources, many content providers offer the ability to access usage statistics. Are usage statistics available, and how are they accessed? Does the vendor provide usage statistics according to the COUNTER Code of Practice? COUNTER is an organization that developed a method for reporting usage statistics in a consistent manner, which allows data from different publishers and vendors to be understood and compared more easily (COUNTER, n.d.). If usage statistics are available, how are they accessed? Does the vendor support Standardized Usage Statistics Harvesting Initiative (SUSHI), a method of automating the collection of usage statistics reports from participating content providers, or must they be accessed through the vendor's website, delivered by email, or some other method (NISO, n.d.)?

Cost and Licensing
For many electronic resources, the cost can vary based on enrollment or population served, the number of concurrent users allowed, number of campuses or branches being served, or other factors. Preferred pricing may be available from a purchasing consortium that the library belongs to, so be sure to check into that with any consortia to which the library belongs.

License agreements for electronic resources describe who can access content and how it can be used, so they are extremely important. License terms typically govern things such whether or not content can be shared through interlibrary loan, the definition of an authorized user, whether and how content can be incorporated into course management systems for online classes, the allowed number of concurrent users, access or download limits, and what type of access the library retains, if any, if the subscription is cancelled.

Concluding Thoughts

Electronic resources can be valuable additions to a library's collection. When selecting online content, there are some particular content and administrative factors to consider, from purchasing and licensing to providing access and the user experience. While this article is not an exhaustive list or how-to, it can serve as a guide for the types of factors that accompany evaluating and selecting online resources, and may also spur conversations about what additional support or professional development may be helpful as electronic collections grow, and in some cases even replace, physical ones. After acquiring electronic resources, the conversation would move to electronic resource management structures, maintenance activities, and troubleshooting access issues.

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