

Expanding User Access to E-Journals through Electronic Consortiums by Academic Libraries.

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Abstract:

Amidst escalating subscription costs and evolving user expectations, academic libraries are facing the imperativeness to enhance their services, to enable their users to access scholarly literature, particularly e-journals. Using a literature review approach, the article explores the role of electronic consortia as a strategic mechanism to expand user access to e-journals. To achieve the aim of the study, the nature of academic libraries was presented, the concept of electronic journals (e-journals) was explored, the advantages of e-journals were highlighted, the meaning of electronic consortium by academic libraries was offered, the reasons/justification for electronic consortium by academic libraries were postulated and how user access to e-journals are expanded through electronic consortium by academic libraries was discussed. However, the article concludes by stressing that forming a consortium offers a bridge of technical competencies, geographical coverage and partnerships that have the potential to implement resilience building among the participating libraries. Hence, e-consortium by academic libraries could be affirmed to be the best strategy to be utilized for expanding user access to e-journals in academic library environments.

Kew words: E-journals, electronic consortium, academic libraries.

Introduction

There is no doubt that the trending developments in technological innovations, inventions, and engineering applications have continued to play pivotal roles in our lives, leading to enhanced and accelerated living conditions for the human race. These developments have greatly and positively impacted societies to the extent that a fulfilled contemporary life cannot adequately thrive and evolve at her zenith without their application for better living. Quite interestingly, the library and information science landscape, alongside her allied/ related fields have realized the need to jump onto the technological train to optimally serve the purpose of their existence.

One of the mediums through which the above can be attained is through library consortium - a form of cooperation among libraries to share their information resources for the benefit of patrons. In other words, the goal of every library consortium is to amplify the capabilities and effectiveness of its member libraries through collective action, including, but not limited to, print or electronic resource sharing, reductions in costs through group purchases of resources, and professional development opportunities (Electronic Information for Libraries, n.d.). The bedrock principle upon which consortia operate is that libraries can accomplish more together than alone (Grogg and Rosen, 2020). Hence, this primer is a careful attempt by the authors, to use a desk research approach to explain how user access to e-journals can be enhanced through electronic consortia in academic library environments.

Nature of Academic Libraries

Academic libraries are information and knowledge banks that are rooted in the universities, polytechnics, research institutes, colleges, and other post-secondary institutions of learning that harvest, process, and provide quality information products and services to their students, faculty, and researchers to enhance teaching, learning and research activities. The primary goal of establishing academic libraries is to acquire, organize, preserve and disseminate timely, relevant, and reliable information products and services that are tailored to the mission and objectives of establishing their parent bodies. In other words, the focus of such libraries is on the academic demands of their parent bodies.

According to Fakiragoudar (2021), the academic library is the driving force of development and the lifeline of society. For Angeline and Rani (2019), academic libraries work together with other members of their institutional communities to participate in, support and achieve the educational mission of their institutions by teaching information literacy—the abilities to identify an information need, accesses needed information, evaluate, manage, and apply the information. Information literacy also involves , the understanding the legal, social, and ethical aspects of information use. In support of the foregoing, Ailakhu and Odili (2022) stated that academic libraries are the revolving heart of higher education institutions and the nature of the academic libraries is a consideration when measuring the quality of institution's graduates. In summary, effective teaching, learning, and research activities cannot be adequately attained without academic libraries.

Electronic Journals (E-Journals) Explained

A journal is said to be any published scholarly material that contains well-researched articles that are written by researchers or other experts. Often, the focus of journals is on specific or related disciplines or fields. Unlike magazines and newspapers that are published for the generality of readers, journals are published on a periodical basis and are intended for an academic or technical audience. Journal is still perceived as an

important and robust method of publishing despite innovations in communication using social media tools as well as blogs, twitter, and web base publication, e-mails, and wikis (Ravinetto & Singh, (2023) and Bjorn et.al.(2023)

Like most other words that have ‘e’ attached to them as a prefix, the added ‘e’ to the word ‘journal’ is meant to describe that the journal in question is electronic. For instance, words like e-book; e-form; e-learning; e-mail; e-reader; e-waste, etc are all electronic versions of the words after the ‘e’ that is attached to them. Though e-journals can be available online, offline, or both, they are usually research papers, review articles, scholarly communications, etc. that are uploaded to the internet. It could be argued that the concept has no standard definition. Hence, it has been viewed by different scholars using different lenses i.e. e-journals, e-serials, online journals, scholarly electronic journals, virtual journals, paperless journals, and networked journals.

According to the Harrods’s Librarian’s Glossary and Reference Book (2005), an e-journal is “a journal for which the full end-product is available on an optical disc, over a network or in any other electronic form, strictly a journal in which the entire process is carried out electronically”. In a bid to offer more details, the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries (2001) as cited by Navjyoti and Vasishta (2007) stated that electronic serials may be defined very broadly as:

“any journal, magazine, e-zine, webzine, newsletter, or type of electronic serial publication which is available over the Internet. Within this broad definition, the titles can be electronically accessed using different technologies such as the World Wide Web (WWW), gopher, ftp, telnet, email, or listserv”.

Thus, e-journals could be said to connote intellectual publications that have undergone editorial procedures, principally transmitted via the Internet, produced at specified intervals, and meant to be utilized more often by a particular audience. Interestingly, the growth of e-journals has been expanding rapidly especially as knowledge and institutions of higher learning keep expanding.

Advantages of E-Journals

E-journals have numerous advantages for both their users and publishers. For instance, they are space-saving, allow remote access, offer chronological issues, can be shared with ease, can be used simultaneously by numerous users, offer timely access, provide powerful searching tools, offer hypertext links, and support multimedia information; all of which the printed journals cannot offer. According to McMillan (1991), electronic journals offer many potential benefits, including timely document delivery, direct links from online catalogues, less expensive subscription prices, and easy gathering of

statistics. In a bid to offer a detailed explanation of the advantages of e-journals, Navjyoti and Vasishta (2007) outlined the following:

1. **Customization:** Only the articles of interest are “delivered” and the user has some control over the appearance of the article both printed and on the screen.
2. **Full-text searching or navigation:** Navigation and search are two of the most attractive features that an online journal can offer. The ease at which electronic journals can be retrieved are far better than those in paper. Every word in the article is indexed and can be used as a retrieval point so that even a caption of a figure can be used to locate a half-remembered article.
3. **Speed of access:** It takes some minutes or even seconds rather than hours or days to access. Browsing an electronic journal is faster relative to print journals.
4. **Speed and cost of publication:** Avoiding the printing and mailing process can easily drop 2 or 3 weeks off the current publication cycle. Machine-readable text from the author is gradually lowering costs and reducing time as the authoring and publishing systems become better integrated and as electronic transmission is used more in the review process. Hence, additional time will be saved.
5. **Integration with other work:** As the capabilities of computers grow, a situation is rapidly developing in which many scholars do most of their work on laptops and personal computers. Scholars carry out their research activities, such as searching bibliographic databases, working with spreadsheets, and creating personal databases using their computing devices. The ability to refer to articles at the same time on the same machine as other tasks are performed will become invaluable.
6. **Economical:** E-journals could be distributed more economically than print journals because the main cost of preparing the text, the review process, and other such procedures are not as capital intensive as the costs of printing and mailing print copies.
7. **Hypertext links:** Existing journal articles contain a large number of links both within the articles and to other articles. They will gradually become useful links in the electronic version where a simple click on a reference will either lead to where it was cited, to an abstract of it, or to the article itself.
8. **Can be saved digitally:** Saving the article as text, Html, or PDF files is extremely easy and can be accessed any number of times. Binding and other related activities do not arise.
9. **No physical processing:** Activities like accessioning, classification, and cataloguing of print journal subscriptions are completely avoided, and the time of the library staff can be saved.
10. **Multimedia facility:** Print journals have only text and two-dimensional pictures. E-journals can include text, audio, and video images as well which help to easily understand the text.

11. **Save physical storage:** Generally, an electronic journal has no physical space restrictions hence does not require shelving space for storage like the print journals.
12. **Search capabilities are tremendous:** Search based on titles, keywords, authors, subjects, abstracts, articles, and full text, can be executed to identify the journals and articles of interest to the user.
13. **Multiple simultaneous access:** E-journals can be simultaneously used by more than one user at the same time, which is possible with print journals.
14. **Less paper:** Paper has many excellent qualities, but an electronic version of documents consumes fewer resources and is easier to manage.
15. **Availability:** E-journals provide 24/7 accessibility and remote access to the user. Scholars can access e-journals remote without the geographical and time limitation

Electronic Consortium by Academic Libraries

Generally speaking, a consortium is “an association of institutions for improved and expanded economic collaboration to achieve mutually beneficial goals” (Glazer-Raymo, n.d.). Similarly, Anwarul Islam and Mezbah-ul-Islam (n.d.) see a consortium as a group of organizations that come together to fulfill a combined objective that usefully requires cooperation and the sharing of resources, and needs to have a clear mutual goal to ensure their success; to deliver “more than the sum of the individual parts”.

However, Fang (2013) posited that a library consortium is a cooperative organization of libraries created to share resources and reciprocity, and restricted by commonly recognized agreements and contracts. Similarly, a library consortium consists of several libraries, preferably with some homogeneous characteristics by subject, institutional affiliation, or affiliation to funding authorities that come together to do certain jobs collectively. When a library, university system, or consortia. For Saini (2017), a library consortium implies a group of libraries that come together to realize a combined objective that usefully requires cooperation and the sharing of resources. Further, Saini argued that the term “consortia” is a plural form of “consortium” but is often used in a singular form. Very essentially, a consortium aims to achieve what the members of a peculiar group or organization are unlikely to achieve on an individual basis. For this article, electronic or e-consortium constitute the application of ICT for the sole aim of fostering inter-library cooperation on information sharing. In other words, e-consortium by academic libraries entails the application of ICT to drive or enhance association, collaboration, linkage, or alliance by such (academic) libraries for information/ knowledge exchange.

Reasons for Electronic Consortium by Academic Libraries

Lots of trendy developments abound that keep on spiralling as a result of the many advances in scientific discoveries and technology. With such developments, the information needs of users continue to grow rapidly, especially in academic environments where research activities are constantly being carried out to make discoveries, broaden human perspectives and enhance our living standards. Consequently, the demand for quality, timely, accessible, and dependable information has continued to increase rapidly to the extent that no library can individually boast of having the required information resources that would adequately serve the information needs of its users. Reasons for academic libraries not being able to cope with such user demands are varied i.e. budget cuts by many institutions of higher learning, pricing models of publishers, per the second generation of refined knowledge etc. Hence, the need for an avenue that would foster information sharing between libraries (library consortium), to serve as a smart avenue that would help in addressing the varied information needs of users in academic environments.

In consideration of the above, Saini (2017) outlined the following as the reasons for library consortia:

- a) **Information Explosion:** - Due to intensive research taking place in almost all fields of knowledge, there is a tremendous increase in the generation of information. Information is provided in many forms and formats. Libraries can't attain self-sufficiency. A consortium is in a better position to address and resolve the problems of managing and archiving e-resources.
- b) **Shrinking Budget:** The cost of books and other information sources is increasing day by day. Consortia are built up to increase the purchasing power of the participating institutions in this critical situation of major financial problems faced by libraries and information centres. A consortium enables its member libraries to get electronic resources at an affordable cost.
- c) **Diversity of user Needs:** Library users want to have access to the material as soon as possible and many of them want information in an online format. The web-based electronic resources are proper a means to meet the expectations of users.
- d) **Professionalization of Library Services:** The role of library professionals has changed from mere conservators to navigators of knowledge. It has been a great challenge for libraries to remain at the front line of the profession. The changed role of librarians has enhanced the value of library consortia.

- e) **Quick Access:** Today researchers hope that they should have access to their journal articles in electronic form because e-resources are cheaper than print sources.

More so, Anwarul Islam and Mezbah-ul-Islam (n.d.) offered the following advantages of library consortia:

- a. To leverage resources by sharing existing resources or collections through the virtual union catalogue and sharing of:
 - i. Collections and collaborating on collection development; each library can contribute unique titles to the consortium – to avoid duplication.
 - ii. Electronic resources including the creation of digital collections-sharing among consortium members need not be just in terms of licensing products. It can also include sharing in the creation of digital collections.
 - iii. Storage of resources – Space is an issue for many libraries.
 - iv. Sharing the archiving of resources.
 - v. Sharing staff expertise- A consortium provides opportunities for staff members to develop new skills and interact with a variety of people who would not have had the opportunity to meet otherwise.
 - vi. Sharing risk- By sharing risk, members of a consortium can undertake projects that are larger than one institution can safely take on its own.
 - vii. This form of cooperation enables the consortia libraries to borrow books, periodicals, articles, and scientific journals, which are not available locally.
 - viii. Electronic access enables the user to initiate their search of remote catalogues and make requests for information.
 - ix. Sharing catalogues - To enable users greater access to larger collections.
 - x. CD-ROM union catalogue that provides access to books, videos, and recordings for each institution.
 - xi. Union List of Serials that provides access to the journal holdings of all member libraries.
- b. To reduce the cost of library operations by obtaining a group purchased price for information products.
- c. To bring pressure on, providers especially publishers to reduce the rate of rising the cost of purchasing information. Thus, library consortiums are commonly formed to negotiate joint purchases (e.g. equipment, software, books, library materials, and licensed electronic databases and resources) and to share resources.

Expanding user access to E-Journals through Electronic Consortium by Academic Libraries

Considering the necessity of information in our daily lives, it is quite unarguable that the role of information in our societies is enormous. It is an enabler, a raw material, and a source of innovation and creativity (Leitner, 2019). As such, access to information implies making sure that everyone has the opportunity to learn new things, grow positively, and make critical decisions for themselves and the society at large and since information is light, those who lack access to it could be said to be left in the dark. This is because those who lack information do not have the critical requirements for improving their lives. In other words, those who lack information are cut off from the required cultural, economic, social, and civic amplifiers that light up the 21st-century parameters for good living. By implication, access to information is essential for the empowerment of individuals, the effectiveness of policies, and the accountability of governments (Leitner, 2019) while its absence creates a widow of insufficiency or unequal opportunities; leading to poorer decision-making processes that stifle progress.

However, it is undeniable that we are in an age of information overload whose explosion has resulted in a situation where no academic library, however large it may be, can generate all new documented information that would adequately satisfy the needs of its users. With an increasing and diverse user demand, a gap became evident in the need for partnering, cooperating, or collaborating to maximally attend to user information needs. There are many prospects in doing so since “there is immense power when a group of people with similar interests get together to work toward the same goals” (Koyenikan, 2016).

The consortium is practically not a new practice within the library and information science landscape as many libraries have been sharing a printed version of their information resources by way of making photocopies or borrowing books from sister libraries on an agreed basis through the mail. In a bid to drive consortium activities, Mosher (1985) urged libraries to throw out the idea of self-sufficiency and insisted that the only way libraries could provide research materials for their patrons was by collaboration. In pursuit of the suggestion by Mosher, several successful collaborations have taken place i.e. the Pennsylvania Academic Library Consortium and the Private Academic Library Network of Indiana (Bohstedt, et.al, 2016). Mallery & Theus (2012) stated that the VALE New Jersey academic library consortium formed the Cooperative Collection Management (CCM) Committee to explore new methods of collection assessment, serials management, e-book collections development, and the pursuit of a shared virtual catalogue in 2005; while Fountain (2016) highlighted the Orbis Cascade Alliance, which identified shared staff as a key area for collaboration, and technical services as a promising area for collaboration.

On a similar note, Burger (2014) noted that the Association of Southeastern Research Libraries (ASERL) participates in several initiatives surrounding digital scholarship, including a collection of 30,000 documents from the Civil War era and “Deeply Rooted,” a new partnership with the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA), a collection of primary source research materials related to agrarian life in the southeastern United States (Burger & Shedd, 2016). Again, many libraries especially in the developed

world use OCLC's database to find and request materials from other libraries (Burgett, 2004).

Nonetheless, e-consortium has taken the practice of librarianship to a greater height, courtesy of the internet- as the medium of information acquisition, storage, and delivery in the 21st century has significantly changed. This is a result of the massive whirl of information explosion that has continued to grow, posing a challenge for information professionals and information centres across the globe. It is in a bid to cope with the trend that the issue of e-consortia came into being.

Conclusion

As a result of the global economic downturn being experienced by many countries across the globe, many academic libraries have been experiencing increased deficits in budgetary allocations. Such funding deficits usually translate to a decrease in services. The situation is gradually becoming the new normal, especially in developing countries. Despite these budget cuts, many academic libraries have been striving to offer impeccable services to their patrons and one such medium they have resorted to utilizing is e-consortium - a form of cooperation among libraries to share their information resources for the benefit of patrons. The aim is to amplify the capabilities and effectiveness of member libraries through collective action, especially through electronic means. The strategy has many benefits to reap by participating libraries. In other words, forming a consortium offers a bridge of technical competencies, geographical coverage and partnerships that have the potential to implement resilience building among the participating libraries. With the above in mind, the issue of e-consortium by academic libraries could be affirmed to be the best strategy to be utilized for expanding user access to e-journals in academic library environments so long as such libraries want to maintain relevance by serving the purpose of their existence.

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