

The vital link: the role of the intermediary in e-resources

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This chapter examines critically the role of intermediaries – both the well established agents that have grown up with print/paper serials and developed to take on new and technically very sophisticated roles, and the new companies that have recently started offering a range of services relating to electronic resources only. All have a common thread in that they provide vital services for managing electronic resources either for libraries or publishers, sometimes both. The modern intermediary now offers services from purchasing and acquisition to federated searching, link resolution, electronic access services to both subscribed and unsubscribed titles, aggregation services, full customer support and the management of electronic resources from single journals to collections of journals, databases and books. Examples of these new services are given and some of the companies that provide these key services are identified. Whilst these services are interesting in themselves they only have a role to play if they add to the value of the content they deliver or reduce the costs of administration for both libraries and publishers – much needed skills for publishers and librarians engaged in the increasingly complex administration of electronic resources.

Introduction

This chapter takes a look at the role of intermediaries in the acquisition, access and management of subscription-based e-resources. These resources can be broadly differentiated into electronic journals, databanks and databases, the content of which is not limited to journals but could be, for instance, a database of books or other content. From the point of view of an intermediary, however, there is often little difference between the type of content since they are more concerned with acquisition, access and management.

Intermediaries are essentially those organizations which act between the publisher and the library, or in some cases the individual, to ensure the smooth and orderly transfer of material from the publisher to the customer requiring the resource. Examples of such intermediaries are subscription agents (see the [ASA web site](#) for a list of agents and intermediaries), hosting and distributing organizations, technology suppliers and aggregators of content.

The range of services offered by such companies is amazingly varied, ranging from the 'simple' acquisition of a resource to sophisticated technical solutions for the management of e-resources, linking references with content and very sophisticated search and access platforms. The one thing they all have in common is that they seek to offer both libraries and publishers less expensive and more efficient means of transferring content from the source to the user, whilst at the same time managing the flows of content and money, rights and access.

To explain fully everything that intermediaries do is probably beyond the scope of this chapter but I hope to outline the main roles and value of intermediaries, illustrating some of the points with examples of services in the field. These examples are not endorsements (the ASA does not endorse individual members' products) but merely act as illustrations of the types of service available.

The need for intermediaries in a changing world

It is obvious that the world of e-resources is constantly changing and shows few signs of coalescing around a single business model, licence or distribution channel. The technologies on which e-resources rely are advancing at a dramatic pace, bringing interesting new possibilities every year. The staggering diversity of technical solutions and business models makes for an enormously complex market which is constantly changing. It is also a widely diversified market with tens of thousands of libraries (and millions of researchers, students and professionals) buying and accessing the content from some fifty thousand suppliers, all of whom do business in a subtly different way. In such a complex world it is immediately apparent that if an intermediary can develop a workable solution for one player it will probably be of help to a great many more similar organizations and therefore the intermediary should be able to provide the service at a much lower cost per customer than each individual organization can do for itself. This is of course the whole point of using intermediaries – they reduce cost and add value and allow the organization to get on with its core business.

Using intermediaries makes sense. They can provide valuable services to both publishers and libraries, which help both parties achieve their goals. Paradoxically, perhaps, the more they assist one group the more they are likely to assist the other, because anything that makes it easier for the customer also makes the supplier's task that bit easier! In a complex, rapidly changing world where the intermediary enables cost sharing and the exchange of experience, thus allowing better value services to evolve, it is not surprising that there is a rapidly growing range of intermediaries and products for the marketplace.

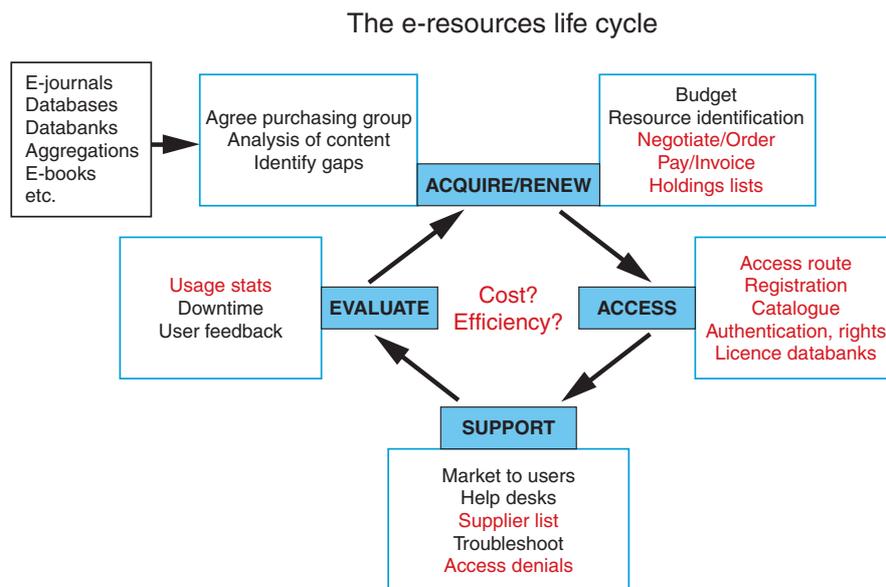
Changing role of the intermediary

Whereas once intermediaries were only required to offer an acquisitions and customer service role, with a few technology companies providing integrated library systems (ILS), the world is now a much more complex and interesting place. The traditional agent now has electronic purchasing mechanisms in place with transparent web-based customer interfaces. Some also provide an access channel for the e-resources they supply – a service which is becoming increasingly common amongst the large and not-so-large traditional agents. Increasingly they are expected to provide the technology which will enable libraries to automatically link to the content, no matter where a user starts a search, through link resolvers and other services. Services are increasingly expected to be modular so that they will interconnect with the many other systems used by both publisher and library, whether proprietary commercial systems or developed in house. Intermediaries not only compete with each other but they also have to challenge systems developed in house and therefore have to be able to show that there are real advantages to using such services in terms of long-term development, cost and functionality. The services supplied by intermediaries are dependent on the functions that libraries especially require since it is eventually the desires and needs of the final customer that determine the form of e-resources required of publishers and how they can best be acquired, accessed and managed.

The e-resource life cycle

In order to show how intermediaries become engaged with e-resources it is simplest to examine the life cycle of e-resources in general and to show where intermediaries interact. In the [diagram](#) below, the life cycle is shown with the actions required at each stage shown in the boxes.

All of these functions are performed by most libraries and it is the job of the rest of the industry (publishers as well as intermediaries) to supply the products and services in such a way as to make these functions easy, because if we do not then the proportion of the budget spent on administration will increase and the proportion spent on content will decrease. At present it is probable that the management of e-resources takes a disproportionate amount of resources without necessarily releasing resources tied



Those things which currently can be handled by intermediaries are highlighted in red. This is intended to be illustrative as changes in technology, user requirements and publishers' products may well introduce additional needs in the future.

up with paper subscriptions. It is therefore very important that the cost of all this management and administration is kept as low as possible.

Acquire and renew

In the field of acquisitions the effective intermediaries are subscription agents. Few libraries have done without the services of agents in the (paper) past and it would seem few wish to be without them in the (electronic) future. This is not surprising as the actions agents provide are in part very similar, along with some radically new and different services. As most libraries will know, agents take a lot of the strain out of ordering through their advanced, web-delivered, purchasing systems, often using e-commerce and automating the entire process as much as possible using EDI standards to transfer orders and claims. For more information on the standard see [ICEDIS](#), [EBSCO](#), [Swets](#), [Harrassowitz](#), and [Prenax](#), amongst others, have sophisticated web-based purchasing solutions for both print and electronic titles and most other agents will have similar services to some degree. Smaller agents often provide specialist services for a specific type of customer or for a particular subject or geographical region, such as [Infocandy](#) in the corporate market and [DEA](#) or [Licosa](#), for example, in the Italian market, to name just a few of the many possible examples. Using e-commerce systems and automation reduces the cost of each transaction and keeps the customer (library) fully in control. At their best, they are far simpler to operate than just about any other ordering and payment system. Many such systems now integrate with e-commerce systems to enable payment as well as ordering and reporting functions. They all enable orders to be checked online by the library so that the status of each subscription and journal on the systems can be seen clearly. This helps reduce the workload at renewal time and also reduces the cost of the processing of the orders – so much so that, in spite of all the changes and investment involved, subscription agents have managed to hold their prices to the customer in line with inflation even though publishers' terms have been steadily eroding agents' margins in recent years.

Using agents to handle e-resources provides significant advantages to both publishers and libraries. Agents pay publishers in advance of delivery (sometimes in advance of their own payment by libraries), thus helping improve publishers' cash flows, and enabling purchases outside the normal budget periods for negotiated licences, for example. They keep accurate and up-to-date records on price, access methods, registration requirements, licences, etc., and also provide substantial reports to libraries on their holdings,

sometimes incorporating free journals and consortium-provided titles. Such acquisition services are administratively complex and demand, especially in the electronic environment, very skilled staff which few libraries can afford to assign to such administrative tasks. Agents therefore provide a valuable acquisition service to libraries which saves them considerable resources. In fact, libraries and publishers rarely challenge this as far as individual subscriptions are concerned, but these days individual subscriptions are only half the story. Agents and intermediaries can and do have a role to fulfil in the bulk subscription business.

Choosing an agent to acquire electronic resources is a challenging task and general advice on selecting an agent is available¹. It is essential that the library and agent fully understand the library requirements, agree the objectives to be met and that both parties are satisfied that these are achievable. Increasingly however, it is becoming important that agents and libraries need to work very closely together on automation and access systems where required.

Agents and bulk purchasing

It is sometimes thought that because consortia buy in bulk on behalf of their members, purchasing intermediaries will become redundant. This has proven to be very far from the case with many consortia now using the services of agents and even more consortia members relying on agent-supplied data to enable them to participate. This is because there is a distinction to be made here between the negotiation on price and payment terms and the administration of the content acquired.

In general, agents provide a far more detailed service to the library to enable all the other activities to take place which are routinely applied to those single titles ordered by the library. For example, their services can include keeping a record of previously subscribed titles in a package so the library knows which titles have archive rights should the package deal ever be cancelled; recording which journals are in a package and how they change and where they move to over the years; providing cataloguing information to enable the titles to be placed automatically into the library OPAC; providing invoicing in such a way that packages can be split up not just amongst consortia members but within each library's faculties, etc; ensuring that service failures are dealt with quickly and promptly and all the appropriate people informed and so on; not to mention the ability of the intermediary to assist with payment, advising on renewals and providing price histories to enable libraries and consortia to determine the value. So if a library or consortium channels its payments and business through an agent it can achieve arguably better value for money than going direct because it will have a cost-effective administration that adds value to the process. Most agents can provide such services and save the customer and publisher money in the process because when handled correctly the administration is much less tedious for both parties. Needless to say, this is a service which is relatively new, has doubtless had teething problems in the past, but is clearly very much needed in the future. The following table published in *Against the Grain*² in June 2005 makes this clear.

| Service | Description | Publisher | Agent (not all agents can offer all services) |
|------------------------------------|--|------------------------------|---|
| Negotiation | Price negotiation | Yes | Possible |
| | Terms negotiation | Yes | Possible |
| Invoicing | Customized invoicing, e.g. faculty and dept coding, etc. and electronic invoicing | No | Yes |
| Database populating | Title-by-title metadata for ILS, etc. | Sometimes | Yes |
| URL maintenance | Titles can be added to system across publishers | No | Yes |
| Gateways and link resolvers | Title and article metadata can be added to common gateway and/or link resolver systems across publishers | No | Yes |
| Licence knowledgebase | Licence terms can be added to common knowledgebase across publishers | No | Yes |
| Help desk | Titles can be added to common help desk for all enquiries | No | Yes |
| Tracking | Tracking of individual titles in package | No | Yes |
| Alerting | Alerting of new issues, changes, etc. as part of common systems | Not as part of common system | Yes |

Here the services provided through an agent are compared with going directly with a publisher. (Often this is part of a consortium arrangement but the results are similar). In general it can be seen that, in many cases, using an agent provides a depth of service that is lacking when dealing directly with publishers, whether or not a consortium is used. What is also often the case is that the extra services provided by the agent are in fact worth more than any reduction in price negotiated, since most of these services will now have to be provided by the library from their scarce and costly specialist staff resources and IT systems.

Negotiation

There are several specialist operations that help libraries and publishers negotiate deals. It is quite clear that only the very largest publishers can even consider the resources necessary to negotiate with all the many thousands of libraries, and practically no library can afford the time and cost of negotiating deals with all the publishers who supply their e-resources now and in the future; there are simply far too many. In order to break this down into a manageable size there are a number of organizations that will take on this role for publishers or libraries or both. For publishers, [EBSCO](#), [Swets](#) and [Ingenta PCG](#) all have services which seek to sell publishers' packages to libraries. One of the best known and probably most successful of these is the co-operation between Swets and [ALPSP](#) to sell the ALPSP journal collection. Again this makes sense as a way for publishers, especially the smaller publisher, to maximize the effectiveness of their own limited number of sales negotiators. By working with a trusted partner who understands the libraries' business many more advantageous deals may be arranged quickly and efficiently and on a global basis.

Similarly for libraries: with so many publishers both large and small, general and specialist, now wishing to sell complex licences to both consortia and individual libraries it is becoming increasingly cost-effective for the library to contract out much of the negotiation to skilled partners. Eventually it may even make sense for libraries to contract out this process entirely, but that may be a little in the future. Negotiating intermediaries can call on their experience of dealing with the publishers concerned to speed the process up through a clear understanding of both parties' real needs and thus find an acceptable compromise quickly and to the benefit of both. This has additional advantages for the library because by using the service of an agent to negotiate and to handle the acquisition they can then ensure that all their e-resources are being handled through the same system and can get the best of both worlds.

Access

E-resources come in many forms available in many different ways. For example, the typical journal may be available in electronic form directly from a publisher's web site, through some gateway service, on a third-party host such as [Ingenta](#) as part of a larger database of content (sometimes called aggregations of content) through pay-per-view, and so on. The start-point of the user's search can be anything from Google to a sophisticated database of bibliographic information, or the library catalogue. Here the technology holds sway and there are many different and valuable offerings.

A-Z lists and gateways

These provide access to electronic journals by incorporating a direct link to the journal at the article level for subscribers. Generally these systems contain links to all electronic journals (or at least the vast majority taken by scholarly libraries) and can distinguish between those with access rights such as subscribed titles or consortium-provided content and those for which no access rights exist. These systems link the user directly with the content through increasingly sophisticated search services. Again, most A-Z and gateway services also provide links to appropriate content and further bibliographic listings, for example through SFX and the recently completed OpenURL standard, and in most cases will also incorporate CrossRef links.

A-Z lists generally reside on the library's system and provide the authentication and authorization required for each publisher, hold subscription or access rights information and are a technical solution to

the challenge of providing an access system across all publishers. An example might be the EBSCO service although Swets and other companies such as TDNet and Serials Solutions provide similar services. Populating the systems and adding subscription information is as automated as possible but the system is entirely under the library's control which, depending on preference, may or may not be advantageous.

Gateways provide a similar service, but the software and data reside on a third party system, often that of one of the traditional agents such as Swets or EBSCO but Minerva and others also have similar systems. Access to subscribed titles and data population is therefore handled by the gateway supplier. Generally this solution has more service elements associated with it because most publishers view gateway services as trusted partners and enable the gateway supplier to act for the library as far as set-up and authentication is concerned, a not inconsiderable benefit. This also has advantages of involving the gateway service supplier much more directly in resolving access denials, which can be to the customer's advantage.

Electronic Resource Management (ERM) systems

This is a constantly changing area with many companies building increasingly complex and flexible systems which manage far more than just the access, in order to meet most customers' requirements. It is in this area that agents, ILS vendors and the new electronic resource management systems all meet and attempt to provide solutions to the management of e-resources ensuring that search facilities, access, licence compliance, linking, and integration with the library systems take place as seamlessly as possible. Many of these are recent but exciting developments and it seems likely at this stage that some real advantages are to be gained by these services which manage to combine many of the elements listed separately in this paper.

Licence databanks

It is essential that the library and the users have clear and easy access to the licences under which they have acquired the journal. Given that a large library may have several thousand, even tens of thousands of journals and a great many different licences to contend with, it is clearly essential for both the publishers and the library to ensure that licence information is clear and can be complied with relatively easily by the library and its patrons. To this end, carefully constructed databanks of licences are a requirement. Needless to say, individual libraries and consortia negotiate special terms as the need arises and it is probable that no two licences for the same content to different libraries are ever 100% the same, which might imply that intermediaries cannot provide a database to meet libraries' requirements. This is in general not the case, however, as the majority of the terms in any licence will be the same for all and if intermediaries can build a databank of terms and conditions that covers each publisher's 'standard' licence and then customizes this to suit each customer's negotiated variations, a great step will have been taken in aiding understanding and compliance. This of course is exactly what some of the larger agents and others are currently providing; for an example of this see the EBSCO licence databank. This is so important that a whole raft of new standards is being co-ordinated by EDItEUR and is evolving to describe such rights in clear and unambiguous terms which can be applied to any licence. Clearly, if an intermediary provides such a licence databank for many customers the cost has to be significantly less than if the libraries all build and maintain such a databank individually.

Authentication

As the industry continues to automate, it is becoming increasingly clear that IP ranges are not the whole solution. It is necessary that the customers can authenticate their users so that only those who genuinely have access rights can gain access. It now looks as if the new Shibboleth authentication systems may well provide an internationally agreed standard method of authenticating users, and intermediaries have a role to play in ensuring that this happens through incorporating such standards into their gateway and access systems.

Usage statistics

Agents and other intermediaries are working on providing full and comprehensive statistics for libraries across the entire range of their requirements, either by providing software to enable the library to harvest the information, or by doing it themselves on behalf of the library and providing the appropriate reports. This has become a real possibility as the newly developed COUNTER standard should mean that usage statistics from publishers and vendors are, at last, much more compatible and will be presented according to an agreed format, making the harvesting of this data much simpler. Intermediaries are likely to be in the forefront of developments to provide such services, with agents doubtless adding a usage statistics package to their many other services as the number of COUNTER-compliant publishers increases. Most intermediary suppliers of usage statistics from gateway or hosting systems are either already COUNTER compliant or shortly will be.

Customer support

In broad terms few, if any, publishers can offer the level of customer support that agents have aspired to in the past. In an increasingly automated world the ability to respond with highly automated yet personal service is becoming hugely important and probably remains the single most cost-effective reason for libraries and publishers to continue to use agents and intermediaries. Good customer support involves the provision of web-based services so that the customer can readily see the status of all their subscriptions and other resources which the agent provides. But it is the ability to respond when things go wrong that is increasingly the most important aspect of customer service. Access denials for no apparent reason are some of the most intractable and frustrating problems there are, and when the library is dealing with thousands of publishers, just finding the right person to call can be difficult.

E-resources demand a solution to access denials within minutes, not the days or weeks of the paper world. If the problem is at the publisher's end then clearly they have the edge on speed as only the publisher can fix the problem. But it is also clear that when things go wrong, suppliers sometimes seem to have a reluctance to admit there is a problem at all and their levels of customer service can on occasion be so bad as to drive their customers to distraction! Given that many suppliers will probably be overseas, and customer and publisher may not therefore have a language in common or they may be within several time zones of each other, it is often the case that sacrificing very little speed to have an intermediary simply take on all customer service can look very attractive to the library. An agent can react very nearly as quickly as direct communication between library and publisher and, at their best, can sometimes be quicker, if only because they may have previously resolved the issue for other clients and can give immediate reassurance about the problem, or because their contacts are better, or they have the language skills and offices in the appropriate country to handle the problems.

In general if intermediaries can provide the best support on 80% or more of queries then it makes sense to use them for customer support and only go direct in the few really urgent cases. This frees up internal resources and should provide an acceptable level of service at a reasonable cost.

Interestingly, it also benefits publishers just as much as libraries. As agents become more skilled at this new service and respond to the needs of their clients then they help to take the pressure off the publishers' subscription and access teams, reducing their staff requirements and making it unnecessary for publishers and libraries to be constantly trying to chase down access denials and other service issues. This means the publisher can give more time and effort to ensuring their systems and those of agents and libraries become ever more closely integrated to make sure access problems become less and less of a challenge in the future.

Publishers' services

One of the differences about information intermediaries compared to some other industries is that neither the supplier nor the customer pays for these services directly, but both contribute to them. In most industries it is normal for the supplier to sell to the wholesaler (agent/intermediary) who sells to the retailer (library) who 'sells' to the individual (researcher, student, etc.). In our industry, margins given by

the publishers are, in general, too small to enable this chain to be fully funded and so in many cases libraries also support the distribution chain by paying their intermediaries in excess of list price. This puts a great deal of strain on the distribution chain since it may appear to the library that there is always a better deal by going direct. In fact this is rarely the case. There is just so much technology and administration involved in managing e-resource subscriptions that the intermediaries earn their keep. Perhaps for this reason many are seeking to make their services more modular and aim some at the library market and some at publishers.

Hosting and aggregation

A new breed of intermediary has sprung up in the last decade, sometimes springing out of library services in academic organizations themselves. (For example, BIDS from Bath University became Ingenta, and HighWire is a part of Stanford Libraries.) These services sought to publish the e-resources of print publishers in the electronic environment and became very successful at selling their services to publishers because it makes sense for a great many publishers to use hosting intermediaries to mount their electronic journals and deliver them to their clients. Costs could be shared and so long as all required essentially a similar service then the resulting service would be less expensive. Indeed many hundreds of publishers use the services of Ingenta, MetaPress, HighWire, Atypon and, doubtless, others.

Aggregation

It became immediately apparent in the electronic environment that repackaging content was considerably easier and less costly and that subject collections of many different publishers' journals could find a ready market inaccessible to individual publishers. Very rapidly, companies such as Ovid and EBSCO Publishing amongst others started to package journals by subject, combining them with search services and selling the resulting subject-specific package to libraries, remitting a royalty to publishers and thus expanding the market and increasing revenues for publishers as well as adding value for the library. This aspect of intermediaries' activities is described very well in an ALPSP paper by John Cox.³

Pay-per-view

Another phenomenon that the e-resource era has brought is an explosion of interest in 'pay-per-view' (PPV) systems. New e-commerce systems, less reliance on the 'big deal' model and the need for speed mean that article-based sales models are making a comeback. It is inherently easier to search a large database of all papers rather than search by individual publisher, so services like those offered by [Ingenta](#) and others may have an even more important role in the future. As more and more publishers seek to introduce some form of business model based on usage this should benefit those with the technology and systems already available to offer new services to publishers either by operating such services for them or through the sale of technical solutions to an article economy. The introduction of open access e-print repositories may also tend to favour the PPV services since in some cases it could be cheaper for libraries to buy articles for the first few months of publication before the articles become available through the open access e-print repositories.

Sales and licensing

As has been described above, there are an increasing number of companies looking to provide sales and licensing services to publishers to help them extend their sales reach into new markets and territories, or just simply to help them cope with the volume of negotiations, queries and licensing deals which e-resources seem to generate.

Conclusions

Agents and intermediaries have created a wealth of new services designed to reduce the administrative burden facing both libraries and publishers. As more and more content is bought in electronic format only, the economies of scale make the use of intermediaries more rather than less efficient, and likely to lead

to an expansion in their role. Services now are becoming more modular, more integrated with library and publisher systems and far more responsive to the needs of the customers and users as well as the suppliers. Helping libraries to reduce their costs benefits publishers directly in that it makes their products much easier to acquire and consequently less administratively complex and expensive to sell. It also helps to reduce the publishers' direct expenditure on customer service whilst at the same time ensuring the customer receives better service than would otherwise be possible. Hence these new services designed to host and distribute publishers' content will help the publishers to sell their site licence packages whilst also generating new products in the form of repackaged and more accessible content for the customer/library. This in turn has the potential to increase the market for the publisher and so reduce their costs to the library.

Web sites of organizations included

Association of Subscription Agents and Intermediaries (ASA)

<http://www.subscription-agents.org>

ICEDIS

<http://www.icedis.org>

EBSCO Information Services

<http://www.ebsco.com>

Swets Information Services

<http://informationservices.swets.com/>

Harrassowitz

<http://www.harrassowitz.com>

Prenax

<http://www.prenax.com/organization.asp>

Infocandy

<http://www.infocandy.com>

DEA – Librerie Internazionale

<http://www.deanet.com>

Licosa

<http://www.licosa.com>

Ingenta

<http://ingenta.com>

COUNTER

<http://www.projectcounter.org/>

Specific services used as examples in this article

EBSCO Information Services

E-Resource Access and Management Group Purchasing

http://www.ebsco.com/home/ejournals/group_purchase.asp

List of Journals

<http://ejournals.ebsco.com/info/ejsTitles.asp>

Electronic Journals Service

<http://ejournals.ebsco.com/>

Publishers' Licences

<http://ejournals.ebsco.com/ejournals/license.asp>



Swets Information Services

Consortia & Multi-Site Services

<http://informationservices.swets.com/web/show/id=40034>

ALPSP Learned Journals Collection

<http://informationservices.swets.com/web/show/id=41415>

SwetsWise Linker

<http://informationservices.swets.com/web/show/id=60916>

SwetsWise Online Content

<http://informationservices.swets.com/web/show/id=40029>**Minerva**

MEOS

<http://meos2.minerva.at/eos2/eos/>**Ingenta**

IngentaConnect

<http://www.ingentaconnect.com>

Ingenta PCG marketing and sales

<http://www.pcgplus.com/>**Teldan**

TDNet's eResource Manager

http://www.teldan.com/e_content_solutions/e_content_section.asp?td=44&vf=108**Serials Solutions**

Serials Solutions

<http://www.serialssolutions.com/home.asp>**EDItEUR**

Onix for licensing terms

<http://www.editeur.org/>**ALPSP**

ALPSP Learned Journals Collection

<http://www.alpsp.org/ALJC/>**References**

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A preprint of this paper can also be viewed in MS Word at:
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<http://www.against-the-grain.com/>
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<http://www.alpsp.org/publications/pub9.htm>

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