

Changing the Direction of Collection Development to Support Online Learning: Negotiating Ebook Purchases with a Society Publisher

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Abstract

With many higher education institutions transitioning to online education in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, academic libraries have increasingly been forced to adjust collection development approaches. This furthers the existing trend towards electronic content and libraries will need to respond by seeking out non-traditional sources; one potential source is society publishers. Society publishers produce important literature in niche fields, but their collections are not always available for library use in electronic format. The American Fisheries Society (AFS) is one such publisher, with 106 monograph titles only available to libraries in print. The faculty, staff, and students in the Fisheries and Wildlife Department at Michigan State University (MSU) rely heavily on AFS monographs, leading the MSU Library to contact AFS to inquire about purchasing ebooks for the library. Electronic access to these texts would allow students, instructors, and researchers to access any title remotely, greatly enhancing their usefulness for remote learning. This paper will describe the negotiation process, MSU's internal accessibility review of the materials, and the logistics of making the ebook collection available to users.

Keywords: Fishery libraries, publishing, negotiation, professional associations, electronic books, collection development (libraries).

Background

Michigan State University (MSU) is a large research institution, of approximately 50,000 students, with a campus in East Lansing Michigan. The MSU Libraries support teaching, learning, and community education by building and sharing a collection of over 7 million individual titles. Like many institutions, MSU had to drastically change educational models in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly all courses at MSU have been taught virtually since March 2020 and operations at the MSU Libraries have also mirrored this shift (Joe, 2020; Tîrziman, 2020). The majority of librarians and staff have worked from home for the duration of the pandemic, with only those unable to perform their job duties remotely continuing to work in the library building.

By forcing the move to virtual library services, the pandemic is accentuating several trends that have been ongoing within the MSU Libraries for years. Chat and email

reference services have played an increasing role in delivering references services at the MSU Libraries, but with the closing of the in-person reference desk those modes have become the primary way for users to interact with reference librarians. Collection development has followed a similar trajectory, with the need to support remote research and online learning accelerating the ongoing trend towards electronic resources and textbooks.

Prior to the pandemic, the MSU Libraries participated in the trend of converting large portions of the collection to an electronic platform (Boateng, 2013). Nearly all current journals and periodicals, many large backfiles, comprehensive ebook packages, and streaming media services are available electronically. With the pivot to remote, however, the Libraries needed to substantially increase support for remote teaching and research capabilities at MSU. One area of potential growth for expanding the available electronic resources is by engaging with small society publishers.

The American Fisheries Society (AFS) is a 150 year old professional association with a mission to conserve North American Fisheries and aquatic resources. They publish significant journals in the field of fisheries, including the North American Journal of Fisheries Management, and monographs that are heavily used by the faculty, staff, and students in the MSU Fisheries and Wildlife (FW) Department. Housed in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, the FW Department is home to over 40 core faculty members, approximately 100 graduate students, 240 undergraduate students, and 30 research associates. The FW Department is also affiliated with several research centers, including the Water Science Network, the Center for PFAS Research, the Quantitative Fisheries Center, and the Kellogg Biological Station (KBS), a remote field station that includes both an experimental pond lab and aquatic field sites. Given the rise in use of electronic devices in the field (Gutowsky et al., 2013) and the remote nature of KBS, the need for virtual resources continues to increase as the print holdings at their small branch library cannot meet all the teaching and research needs of the students and faculty stationed there.

AFS has a very active publishing branch to advance fisheries research, producing both journals and monographs. The AFS Library of monographs currently holds 106 titles, many of which are influential and in high demand for the FW students at MSU. These titles are not available as part of any existing ebook package or through any of the established ebook purchasing channels. While AFS does offer full book PDFs for sale on their society website, they are licensed for individual use and are not available for libraries. Although MSU has nearly 70% of AFS titles already in print, the high demand for these titles combined with the need for digital support for teaching and research in response to the pandemic led the MSU Libraries to reach out to AFS to open negotiations into direct access to their ebook collection.

AFS Ebook Collection

AFS responded to initial inquiries with information on their institutional subscription model for ebook access. This model is designed for state fisheries agencies and offers access to the full library for a 5 year subscription period. Pricing for this model is tiered

based on staff size and access is mediated through AFS. The files are hosted by AFS and users must request a “coupon code” that would facilitate downloading each individual title from the AFS online bookstore.

This subscription model has several drawbacks that made it impractical for use in a university setting. The pricing model’s narrow focus on staff size leaves open how to account for student use. This is a particularly relevant issue for universities with large student populations, as a tiered approach can quickly become cost prohibitive. Similarly, the mediated access via “coupon code” would be impractical for MSU students and staff who are accustomed to accessing electronic resources via IP authentication. The added complexity and delay would be less than ideal for MSU’s users and the volume of requests coming from a large research institution could potentially overwhelm AFS staff. Finally, the subscription nature of the collection also posed a challenge, albeit a lesser one. The MSU Library prefers to purchase perpetual access to materials over subscriptions whenever possible in order to ensure the continuity of collections. While perpetual access is not possible in all situations and with all vendors, it is the preferred means of electronic access.

Taken together, these issues made clear that the institutional subscription model would not work for the MSU Libraries. As a result, the negotiations turned to developing a completely new perpetual access ebook purchase package with AFS. With this new option, AFS’s offer positively addressed all of the issues that made the subscription package untenable. The new offer granted the MSU Libraries permanent ownership of the entire AFS ebook collection with the MSU Library hosting the PDFs on a local library server. The local hosting component is key to the viability of this model, as it allows the MSU Library to make the PDFs available to users via their standard IP authentication system and eliminating the need for a download “coupon code” system. AFS also simplified their pricing, offering a flat rate price that eliminated the need to account for individual staff and student use. Finally, the AFS offer included a prepay option for future publications over a set number of years, a promising feature given the uncertainty around future budgets due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Accessibility Review and Negotiations

Having addressed the drawbacks inherent in the subscription based model, AFS and the MSU Libraries were able to proceed with negotiating the perpetual access option. Negotiations revolved around two central issues: updating the terms of use to reflect the details of the purchase option and the accessibility of the files. For electronic files, accessibility means that programs and products are “designed and developed so that people with disabilities can use them” (W3C Web Accessibility Initiative, 2019). The MSU Libraries are committed to building a collection of materials accessible for all users and utilizes a Libraries Accessibility Working Group that assesses materials under consideration for purchase or subscription. AFS provided a sample PDF of one of their titles for assessment, which utilized both automated software and manual methods. The automated tools include the Web Accessibility Evaluation Tool (<https://wave.webaim.org/>) and color contrasting software to ensure appropriate contrast between texts and background images and colors. The manual methods include screen

reader compatibility review and checking images for alternative text, which would allow screen reading software to describe the image to a visually impaired user. The sample PDF provided by AFS revealed a largely accessible document, although issues with labeling elements such as headings, tables, and alternative text for images did exist. These issues were minor and were not cause for concern.

The other issue involving negotiation was updating the terms of use document, which was written for use with the subscription model and required an update to reflect the purchase agreement. The terms need rewritten sections on the pricing model, hosting and access options, adding future published materials, and excising all language referencing the subscription package. The updated terms of use have the potential to simplify future AFS negotiations with libraries, as future purchase agreements will be able to make use of these updated terms of use with only minimal negotiation and editing.

Next Steps and Lessons Learned

With the negotiations complete, the purchase order proceeded, drawing on multiple collection funds, including the environmental sciences, general sciences, and the Russell and Laura Whalls Endowment. The Whalls Endowment Fund provides money for the purchase of monographs published on the topics of limnology, freshwater ecology, and fisheries, of which there are many in the AFS collection. Following the order AFS shared access information with the MSU Libraries Electronic Resources Librarian, who proceeded to download the PDFs for storage on an MSU Libraries server. The titles did not come equipped with MARC records associated with them, so original cataloging is currently underway by library technical services staff. Once complete, individual titles will be searchable within the catalog while also collectively linking the entire collection as a series to facilitate online browsing.

The primary lesson learned from this interaction centers on the benefits and challenges of working with a small society publisher. This project would not have been possible if not for AFS' flexibility in developing an entirely new purchasing model from scratch, something many larger publishers would not consider. The challenges came from the limited resources available to smaller organizations to apply to developing MARC records or to ensure full compatibility of materials.

Conclusion

Although responses have varied by institution, the COVID-19 pandemic has altered higher educational systems in fundamental ways, including library service models and collection development strategies. While electronic materials were a core component of library collections prior to the pandemic, the need for supporting remote research and online teaching ensures that these resources will only grow in impact. In seeking ways to support the MSU FW Department in this way, the MSU Libraries identified the AFS as a society publisher producing valuable monographs that are not otherwise available for library use. Following the development of an acceptable purchase model, an accessibility review, and negotiations to update the terms of use, the MSU Libraries were able to purchase the entire AFS Ebook Collection. Working with a small publisher

on a new package had the benefit of the flexibility to negotiate a custom deal, but also the challenge of limited resources for applying accessibility principles or creating MARC records. Ultimately, this new collection will be a benefit for FW faculty, staff, and students as they continue to work and learn remotely.

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