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Random Ramblings - The Journal is Dead: Long Live the Article

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Random Ramblings — The Journal Is Dead; Long Live the Article

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I may be premature in mourning the death of the journal as the basic unit for purchasing serial publications, but I believe this change is inevitable. I don't mean that journals will completely disappear anytime soon but rather that researchers, libraries, and vendors will come to look at the individual article, disembodied from the journal that contains it, as the key component in scholarly communication. Look at what has happened in the music industry. Music vendors used to sell albums in the physical world; they now sell songs in the digital world. Once they had the possibility to do so, buyers stopped paying for a whole album when all they wanted were the best or most popular songs on the album. While doing so has created difficulties for the concept album where the songs were intended to be played together in a specific order, consumers welcomed this change though the music industry has not yet discovered a satisfactory, new business model. To apply this analogy to journal publication, most journals have a definite focus; but readers are not equally interested in all the individual articles that are most often not linked together except by the publication scope of the journal except in the case of a special issue on a defined narrow topic.

In the physical world, the journal arrived as a package so that the reader was tempted to look at the entire contents even if some articles, reviews, etc. were of lesser interest. Even researchers looking for an individual article still had to handle the individual issue and perhaps flip through the pages.

The digital world is quite different. The closest equivalent is looking at a complete digital issue of a journal but even here the reader must click on each article to browse the journal's contents rather than skimming the printed text. Except for key journals in their field, researchers are more likely first to discover the individual article in an indexing or abstracting service, posted on a blog or discussion list, or as a citation in another relevant work. In the first and most common case, the user finds a relevant citation in an indexing or abstracting service apart from the journal that contains the article. The user will be happiest if the source includes full text. If not, the second best choice is having one of the article linking services available from many different companies including **OCLC**, **EBSCO**, **Serials Solutions**, and others. Most researchers are particularly pleased when the link takes them to the individual article and bypasses the intermediary stop of accessing the entire journal issue since finding the individual article within the volume takes more time.

Articles also become orphaned from the journal issue when an indexing or abstracting service only selectively indexes a publication. The researcher finds individual articles within the scope of the database but does not have access to the complete contents of any issue. For example, according to *Ulrichsweb*, the journal that I used to edit, *Resource Sharing and Information Networks*, is selectively indexed by fifteen services, mostly in computer science and engineering, since only some of the articles fit within their scope. For these services and, by extension, the researchers who use them, the journal as journal holds little interest because parts of the issue are not relevant to the subject focus of the access tool.

The journal becomes even less important when a resource presents a collection of completely disembodied articles on a defined subject. I could find but one example, *All-About-Psychology.com* (*http://www.all-about-psychology.com/psychology-journal-articles.html*). It describes itself as: "Written and regularly updated by a lecturer in psychology, this Website was launched in March 2008 and is designed to help anybody looking for informed and detailed information on psychology."

One vision for the future includes collections like the one above but with much greater academic respectability. One option would be for publishers to sell collections of articles in the same way that they now sell collections of eBooks. A major journal publisher might bring together all the articles on an important topic such as "biology" or "criminal justice" that would be of interest to a broad audience. I could see these collections being created for both undergraduate and master's level research; they would have less value for advanced researchers on specialized topics. Such a collection might be of particular interest to smaller academic libraries that could not afford to subscribe to all the journals from which the articles were taken. The publisher would most likely already either own the copyright or have some clause in the contract to allow them to reuse the articles.

A second option would be for publishers to work together to create such article collections or for compilers, either on their own or as part of a vendor initiative, to select the articles in the same way that libraries have anthologies of English literature. These collections might have increased respectability if experts in the field did the selection. One issue would be obtaining the permissions though I would hope that publishers would welcome another revenue stream.

The next step could be a complete disassociation of the article from the journal. In some ways, this model would borrow many features of open access publishing. Some review board, perhaps monitored by a professional organization in the discipline, would evaluate articles submitted to it with the same care, including peer review, as do editors in the current system. Articles after review and editing would enter into a subject based collection. I see two potential business models that are not mutually exclusive. The first would be to charge a fee, I would hope that it would be as low as possible, for each submitted article. The second would be for the database's owner to sell access in the same way as the commercial publishers do. I would consider this to be a much less preferable option unless the subscription price were kept low. The main obstacle to any such initiative would be the need for university committees to accept such publications as counting toward tenure and promotion. (As an aside, I hope a similar system appears for scholarly monographs.) As for access, sponsors might license standard database indexing software and could perhaps allow them to be indexed in **Google Scholar** and any similar services. Finally, the authors should have permission to include them in institutional repositories.

A final possibility for a disciplinary collection as described above would be to find some way to include less formal publications. I find myself reading more informal literature these days than formal articles. Discussion list posts, blogs, and ezines provide more current and, many times, more honest accounts of what is going on in the field. Admittedly, many of them won't have great permanent value; but perhaps a way could be found to remove outdated content though the ability to store cheaply vast quantities of information might make purging the collection unnecessary.

Understanding the full implications for scholarly communication of the transition from the physical to the digital world may take some time. Digital publications are bringing about new research habits that have already done much to disassociate the article from its container, the scholarly journal. The next logical step would be for the article stand on its own as the basic unit of serial publication. 🌳