

ENSURING QUALITY CUSTOMER ACCESS TO ONLINE CONTENT WHEN SOCIETY JOURNALS CHANGE PUBLISHERS

An STM Position

Many STM members publish scholarly journals on behalf of scientific or medical societies. Such publishing is conducted as a matter of a business contract between the society and the publisher, and the opportunity to publish on behalf of a society is often a matter of a bidding process among publishers selected by the society. Contractual matters are solely the province of the contract parties, and STM has no role in such “private” matters and does not intend in any way to interfere with existing contractual relationships. For a general discussion of the issues that may be involved in such transfers, STM recommends the Advice Note 18 of ALPSP (Association of Learned Professional & Scholarly Publishers) called “When a society journal changes publisher” (see <http://www.alpsp.org/socjournal1.pdf>). STM also welcomes the establishment of a working group “Transfer” by the UK Serials Group to address issues concerning the transfers of journals between publishers (see <http://www.uksg.org/transfer.asp>). It should be noted that many of the principles outlined herein and in the ALPSP note are equally applicable to general transfers or acquisitions of a journal or a portfolio of journal titles (whether or not society-owned), and applicable as well when societies decide to bring this publishing activity (back) in-house.

There are issues that potentially impact library customer access to subscribed content that may arise when a society journal changes publishers or when a society elects to begin or reinstate its own direct publishing activities. STM supports voluntary compliance with the principles and approaches outlined herein-- these principles are intended to promote continuity of access to journal content. By addressing issues relating to continuity of access in their agreements, societies will be able to put their publishing needs out for competitive tender, with less concern that switching to a new publisher, or deciding to bring the publishing activities back within the society, will interfere with continuous access by customers to electronic content. Observance of these Guidelines is therefore pro-competitive, as it will reduce the total costs of switching publishers and has other pro-customer benefits.

One of the key issues that has arisen in the context of the transition from print to online delivery of STM journals is the question of the library customer’s own “archive” of subscribed content. In the print environment, such an archive was an automatic feature - print issues were delivered and retained by the customers in their physical collection. While most database and software licenses do not provide for “post-termination” use or access, many library customers indicated that unless e-journal licensing initiatives did provide for post-termination access, they would be reluctant to accept such initiatives. The customer demand was essentially to have an electronic form of the print collection archive. Many STM members provide for just such access in their licenses for electronic journal content.

Librarians also stress the desirability of continuing to access the content they subscribe to through the same system, and under the same business terms, that they originally accepted (through the publisher license), or at least without significant re-negotiation and re-learning.

These are significant concerns expressed by the library customer community, and these Guidelines are intended to respond pro-actively to these concerns.

The following principles are suggested by STM to deal with the question of online access for customers when journals change publishers:

1. Publishers of society journals should always ensure that their customer licenses do not exceed the scope of the license granted to them by the owner societies.
2. The prior publisher should be able to continue to offer access (on a non-exclusive basis) to previously licensed journal content under, and according to the terms and conditions of, existing customer licenses.
3. The prior and new publishers should work together to minimise disruption to users by sending out joint communications and co-ordinating work on changing the access arrangements. The new publisher should aim to provide access on-line as soon as reasonably practicable after the transfer.

The gist of the guidelines noted above is that continuing post-termination access may be provided by the original publisher to existing customers for previously licensed content, provided this is consistent with the existing society journal publishing contract and with existing customer license terms and conditions.

Certain of these principles may be varied by express agreement among the two publishers and the society involved, presumably as a transitional matter.

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