

## **A Practical Approach to Switching to Electronic-only Journal Subscriptions**

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Budgets, space limitations, and the ever-increasing patron demand for 24x7 access to library material is rapidly driving most libraries towards electronic-only journal subscriptions. Much has been written in the literature and discussed at conferences about the benefits, costs, and risks of going “e-only”. Lists of criteria have been developed. However, the practicing librarian needs more than a mere checklist of items.

The author has developed two forms that have proved helpful in providing a semi-quantitative analysis that permits comparisons between different publishers. In most cases, publishers’ policies regarding electronic-only subscriptions are quite constant across their catalog of titles.

The first form is designed to be a quick screen to gauge the feasibility and perils of going e-only. The second form uses a weighted voting system to assign points to various criteria in three columns: “safe”, “iffy”, and “unsafe”.

The Quick Screen (Form #1) starts with two easy-to-answer questions asking if the publisher offers an e-only option and whether there is at least a small cost savings. A negative answer to either question is a “show stopper”, terminating consideration going e-only with the journal/publisher. Regarding the second question on cost savings, an objection could be raised that this should not be a show stopper, since going e-only will save binding costs, storage, etc. Putting aside a couple of studies that indicate that electronic subscriptions may be more expensive to manage than print ones, it is the opinion of the author that the risks of going e-only are simply not worth it if at least a small, immediate cost savings is not available. Other librarians are welcome to make a different judgment and modify the Quick Screen Form accordingly.

The rest of the Quick Screen Form focuses on the central issue of ownership of content and continued access to past content, should a current subscription not be maintained at some point in the future.

The second form lists 13 criteria in rows across a table. Each of the criteria is assigned a weight via points. The author encourages librarians to readjust these weights to reflect the priorities important to their particular library and subject discipline. The author’s two major concerns are continued, long-term access to content and the degree of equivalence between the electronic version and the print version of a given journal. Many publishers have begun to address the long-term access issues that have long been raised by the library profession. Few publishers have 100% equivalence between their electronic and print editions with news items, front matter, letters to the editor, advertisements, announcements, etc. often deemed not worthy of electronic access.

This second evaluation form is less complicated than it may appear at first glance. One simply takes a criteria (row) and assigns the points in the appropriate column. For example, if cost savings for going electronic only are 15% or more, 3 points are assigned in the Safe column. If cost savings are between 7-14%, 3 points are assigned in the Iffy column.

The author does not represent this second form as totally objective precise measurement tool. It has proved useful in making comparisons between different publishers. There will always be a judgment call by the collections librarian at the end of the process. Still, the weighted point system distributed among the three columns does give a good semi-quantitative sense of the safety in going e-only. Readers are encouraged to try out the second form with a few publishers they are familiar with and the benefits of this approach should become apparent.

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## Form 1: The Quick Screen Evaluation Form

**Publisher** \_\_\_\_\_

**Representative Journal Title** \_\_\_\_\_

1) Offers E-only subscription option? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_  
*[If NO, STOP]*

2) Offers discount for E-only option vs. print? Yes, \_\_\_\_ % No \_\_\_\_  
*[If NO, STOP]*

### 3) Ownership of Content Options

a) Electronic back files after \_\_\_\_ years are available for free on Internet  
Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_

b) Electronic back files can be purchased. Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Accessed on the publisher's website, or  
\_\_\_\_ Physical media (CD-ROM/DVD) sent annually to subscriber.

### 4) Assurances of Continued Access to Content

\_\_\_\_ Third party mirror site  
\_\_\_\_ Escrow arrangements  
\_\_\_\_ Contract language

**Other** \_\_\_\_\_

**Key Question: If after paying for an e-only subscription for 10 years and we then drop the subscription, what happens to our access to those 10 years?**

- \_\_\_\_ All access to those 10 years is cut off.
- \_\_\_\_ Access to those 10 years on the publisher's web site continues without charge.
- \_\_\_\_ Access to those 10 years on the publisher's web continues with small maintenance fee.
- \_\_\_\_ Publisher will send e-version of those 10 years to subscriber in a current appropriate format to mount locally, if we wish.
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**FORM 2: JOURNAL PUBLISHER EVALUATION SHEET – How safe is converting to electronic only?**

**Publisher** \_\_\_\_\_

<b>ITEM</b>	<b>Points</b>	<b>SAFE</b>	<b>Ct</b>	<b>IFY</b>	<b>Ct</b>	<b>UNSAFE</b>	<b>Ct</b>
Back files free or available for purchase if subscription terminated in future?	(8)	Avail for free or affordably priced.		Available but expensive.		Not available, license (rental) only.	
Back files available where?	(3)	Avail. at multiple 3 <sup>rd</sup> party sites		Avail. at a single 3 <sup>rd</sup> party site.		Avail. only at publisher's web site.	
3 <sup>rd</sup> Party Archive/Mirror/Escrow in case of business failure	(4)	Yes		No, but organization on solid foundation.		No, uncertain business future.	
Type of publisher?	(2)	Scholarly Society/SPARC		Other non-profit		Commercial	
Library-publisher relationship	(2)	Library-friendly		Mixed		Library-unfriendly	
Color available in electronic copy	(5)	Yes		Electronic B&W only, color unimportant		No	
Copy of Record is:	(2)	Electronic		Not specified		Print	
All print items in electronic version	(8)	Yes		All technical & most news items		Missing technical items	
Additional content in electronic	(2)	Yes, significant		Yes, minimal		None	
ILL Lending & Fair Use Rights	(4)	Yes		Limited		No	
Cost savings	(3)	15% or more		7-14%		0-6% or premium	
Regional Holdings	(1)	Commonly avail.		Few		Our library sole regional source	
Impact on consortia arrangements	(2)	None		Minimal		Significant	
<b>TOTALS</b>		<b>SAFE POINTS =</b>		<b>IFY POINTS =</b>		<b>UNSAFE POINTS =</b>	