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# The value of online books to university libraries

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## Background

In March 2006, senior members of staff from five of some of the world's most influential university libraries were interviewed about their experiences with Books on ScienceDirect. This is an online collection of Nobel-prize winning research, cited in the books series, handbooks and reference works. This white paper outlines why university librarians have purchased the collection and details the benefits they say that access to this collection brings to their users. This paper also looks at the implications that online books have for the future of university online information resources and their strategy to deliver quality service to their users.

The respondents were asked to comment on:

- The main factors that influenced their purchase of Books on ScienceDirect
- The accessibility of Books on ScienceDirect to a wide audience within their institution
- The role and value of Books on ScienceDirect in a research environment

### Respondents

This paper has been written with the generous input and consent of librarians.

1. **Susanne Dowling**, Electronic Resources Librarian, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia.
2. **Steven Thompson**, Co-Leader, Technical Services, Brown University, Rhode Island, USA.
3. **Marilyn Fordyce**, Collection Management Librarian, University of Otago Library, New Zealand.
4. **Ger Spikman**, Department for Selection and Content Management, Wageningen University, The Netherlands.
5. **Zofia Brinkman**, Delft University of Technology Library, Delft, The Netherlands.

## Summary

Librarians are tasked to provide information access environments that serve wide user communities, support the courses taught within their institutions, manage spiraling costs and make the most of state-of-the-art technologies. Online books are key to fulfilling this task. Books on ScienceDirect are well received by respondents, as an important way to meet their user demands as well as their information strategy.

The shift of information access from the physical library to the user's work space and laptop is noted by all librarians since their purchase of Books on ScienceDirect. Some user groups, specifically undergraduate students, frequently use electronic books for their reference work.

*“Anything we take that is heavily used in print and is now put online increases our user satisfaction greatly. The chief benefit of Books on ScienceDirect is just being available around the clock.”*

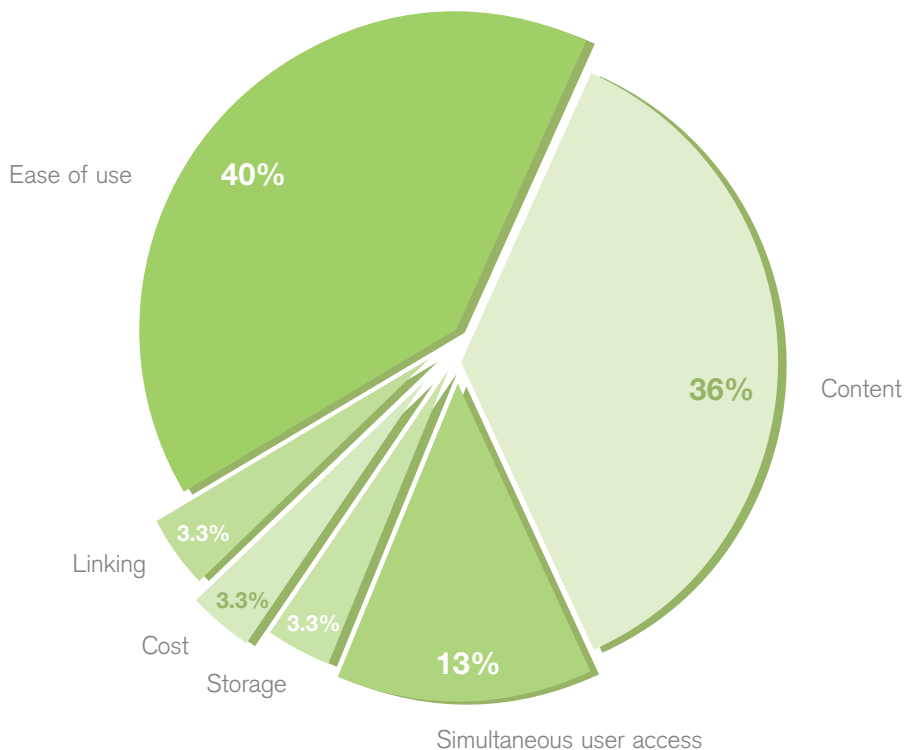
Steven Thompson, Co-Leader, Technical Services,  
Brown University, Rhode Island, USA

All respondents are familiar with Books on ScienceDirect. Some had only recently purchased the collection, but despite their differing levels of experience with the collection, some key themes and benefits emerged from the interviews.

- **A broader perspective** – Respondents find that their users enjoy easy access to relevant content and benefited from searching across the years of content, and cross searching and linking to journal content.
- **Meeting purchase policies** – By providing quality content online, Books on ScienceDirect is well timed to meet emerging university policies to purchase more online books. An upfront payment model proves to be popular, because it allows universities to make use of remaining year-end budget.
- **Concurrent usage** – University year timetables often mean that certain books can be in high demand one week and then unused the next. Having Books on ScienceDirect means that no one misses out on key information at these crucial times in the academic year.
- **Remote access** – One of the biggest advantages of Books on ScienceDirect is that library users can obtain access without actually going to the library. Access out of the library is convenient for both the student and institution. There are some costs being cut at universities as the processing of physical books is gradually being reduced.

## Books on ScienceDirect value ranking

Respondents were asked to name and rank factors that influenced their decision to purchase on Books on ScienceDirect. It is clear that the ease of online access to books was an important factor for the majority of the universities questioned.



### On ease of use

Today's user expects to get information when they need it and fast. The majority of respondents were attracted to benefit from Books on ScienceDirect because of ease of use. User expectations and busy workloads demand immediate access to content they need.

"The benefits of Books on ScienceDirect as opposed to the printed versions is that they are faster, easier and have more flexible access for users. It's easier to search and identify relevant content."

Susanne Dowling, Electronic Resources Librarian, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia

*"The benefits of Books on ScienceDirect as opposed to the printed versions is that they are faster, easier and have more flexible access for users."*

Immediate access to vast amount of book content means that the chore of searching is streamlined, giving users more time to focus on their scientific research and analysis. Many respondents find the ability to search and link across different content types on one platform is a major benefit. Susanne Dowling commented: "Being able to search across different resource types is an advantage."

*"Being able to search across different resource types is an advantage."* ■

Brown University has noticed that users working in scientific disciplines are more likely to be familiar with technology and, as a result, have higher expectations that books will be accessible electronically.

"These science disciplines use Books on ScienceDirect heavily and they didn't need to make any transition. They are already familiar with ScienceDirect; it is simple for them.

The biggest advantage is that people can get these books without coming to the library. And they can get them any time of day. Particularly in the chemistry and biology areas, these people very rarely come to the library any more. This is the way we work now."

*"People can get these books without coming to the library. And they can get them any time of day."* ■

Marilyn Fordyce at New Zealand's University of Otago Library concurred: "Our e-savvy users have high expectations of ease of use, access and linking and if we don't meet these expectations then we risk losing our role as key to provision of information."



## On fulfilling university policy to deliver quality content online

The delivery of quality content online is an important decision factor when universities purchase Books on ScienceDirect. The majority of the universities interviewed have instituted a policy to buy electronic books. The digital provision of their print book list is a logical next step for many librarians in the creation of a digital library.

“We bought books in print and now we are developing an electronic library so we intend to have all books available in a digital format as well, so that is why we bought Books on ScienceDirect.”  
Ger Spikman, Department for Selection and Content Management, Wageningen University, The Netherlands.

*“Now we are developing an electronic library so we intend to have all books available in a digital format as well.”*

The relevance of the content for teaching purposes is also a decision driver. Libraries are tasked to support the courses taught at their institutions, and make available online books to help fulfill that requirement. “Many of the titles in Books on ScienceDirect cover areas of interest and topics taught on campus, so the content is relevant,” commented the librarian at the University of Otago. “In an increasingly online environment where access to quality, relevant content that meets user needs is a key strategy for academic libraries, e-versions are the obvious direction for us to go.”

*“Many of the titles in Books on ScienceDirect cover areas of interest and topics taught on campus, so the content is relevant.”*

Some universities are particularly interested in purchasing popular printed books within the Books on ScienceDirect collection, as they find it difficult to meet the demand for the print version. Once aware of the full title list available online via Books on ScienceDirect, many librarians realized they could meet more of their user needs by subscribing to collections. “We were most interested in having Methods in Entomology online. It is a heavily used title in print, and we felt having it online would greatly enhance our users’ ability to get this 24/7 without coming to the library,” said the librarian at Brown University. “When we looked closer we saw there were other opportunities as many standing orders we used to have in print could be cancelled and replaced with things included in the Life Science collection on ScienceDirect.”

*“In an increasingly online environment where access to quality, relevant content that meets user needs is a key strategy for academic libraries, e-versions are the obvious direction for us to go.”*

## On financial savings

The cost savings of purchasing Books on ScienceDirect is immediately recognized by some of the university libraries interviewed. The processing of printed books and the costs associated with security is noted at Brown University: “Our aim was to reduce our costs by canceling print buying and having the online versions which we think is a much better way to have the material. By reducing the processing of physical books, the library is noting cost savings. From a library perspective we don't need to deal with a lot of printed material, which means processing it, storing it and even binding it sometimes. So it saves us time and money. It's a win-win on both sides of the coin.”

*“By reducing the processing of physical books, the library is noting cost savings.”*

At Brown they also noticed that staff time is reduced by the introduction of Books on ScienceDirect. Other universities see the future cost benefits; immediately some staff may need to be trained, however in the future this will cut their work time.

*“So it saves us time and money. It's a win-win on both sides of the coin.”*

The upfront payment model is widely applauded by each of the libraries, but it is not necessarily the reason behind their purchase. The librarian at Murdoch University stated, “For Books on ScienceDirect we prefer upfront purchase because it is very difficult to administer ongoing commitments for what have in the past been upfront purchases.” Delft University was very positive about the upfront model “Part of the reason we chose Books on ScienceDirect was the new upfront payment model, pay it at once.”

## On storage

The purchase of Books on ScienceDirect has had an immediate impact on university library space. Online access to books frees up valuable storage space, helping libraries deal with the physical expansion of books collections that grow year-on-year. Should universities continue with their policies to buy e-books, building extensions could be an expense of the past.

Susanne Dowling at Murdoch University noted: “We have reduced storage space because of Books on ScienceDirect, as for all other electronic resources. We are not in a position to build more physical storage space. This space is now used for more study spaces, chairs, tables and computers.”

*“We have reduced storage space because of Books on ScienceDirect, as for all other electronic resources.”*

Brown University is presently renovating their library and will be clearing out spaces that previously held books for alternative productive areas such as workspaces.



For more information on Books on ScienceDirect, please visit [www.info.sciencedirect.com/books](http://www.info.sciencedirect.com/books)

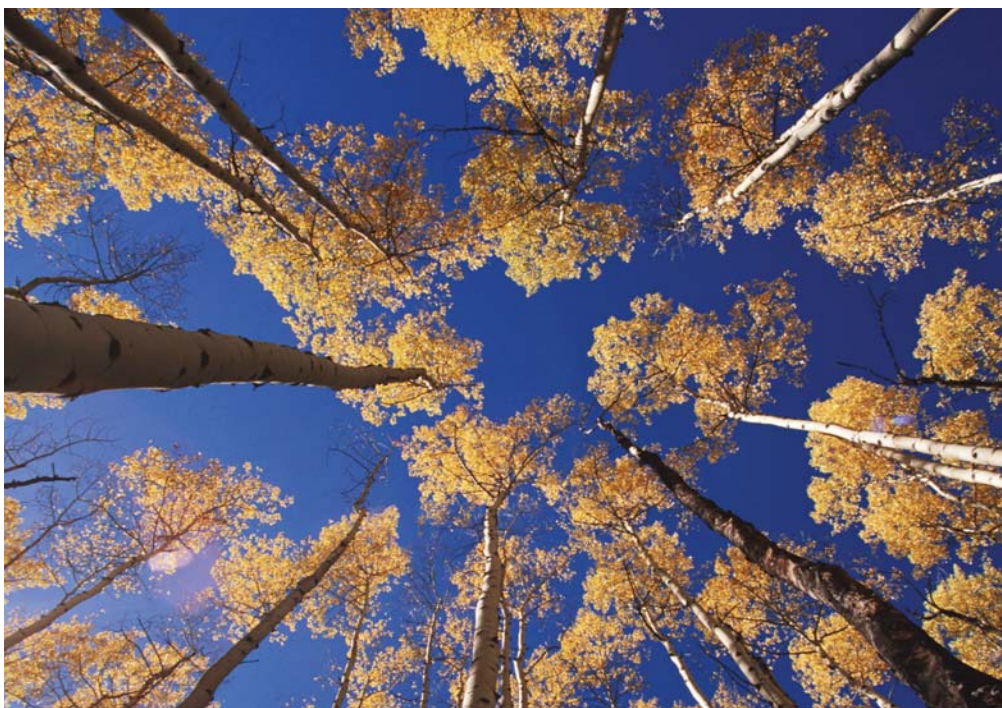
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