

When critical mass is key

The Colorado Alliance purchases books on ScienceDirect





Michael Levine-Clark
Dean of the University Libraries, University of Denver

Michael is an internationally respected authority on collection development, acquisition of electronic and other nontraditional holdings, demand-driven acquisition and new models of library discovery.

Michael played an instrumental role in leading the recent eBook acquisition from Elsevier by the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries.



George Machovec
Executive Director, Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries

George was appointed the Executive Director of the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries in 2012.

He has worked at the Alliance since 1993 as the Interim Executive Director, Associate Director, and Technical Coordinator. George has undergraduate degrees in physics and astronomy and an MLS from the University of Arizona.

About the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries

The Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries (the Alliance) is a consortium of 15 institutions representing major libraries located in Colorado and Wyoming. Founded in 1974, the Alliance continues to cooperate and share resources; since 1999, the Alliance has negotiated eBook purchases, recognizing very early on the unique value of eBook content for their users.

In the past, the Alliance has purchased eBook packages from many of the major publishers. In 2015 a decision was made to expand their collection of Books on ScienceDirect by purchasing a collection of monographs, Major Reference Works and Book Series published between 2007 and 2018 from Elsevier. Following that purchase, the Alliance is already looking to acquire additional Book Series in 2017.

This case study explores some of the criteria used to make that decision and shows that several factors must be considered when purchasing books – whether individually or in packages. Of major importance to the Alliance: Having access to a critical mass of journal and book content on one platform, making it easy for researchers to access the content they need when they need it.

Why books on ScienceDirect

Over the years the Alliance has purchased eBooks in a multitude of ways, from ad hoc acquisition of titles to satisfy faculty requests to deals for larger collections that capitalize on both breadth and depth of content.

According to Michael Levine-Clark, Dean of the University of Denver - Libraries, one of the most important things is to provide users with access to a critical mass of quality content.

Researchers often need to access the more broad, foundational content in eBooks and more specialized information or recent research in journal articles at various stages of the research cycle, so having them both available on one platform is seen as a big benefit and driver for adding more eBooks to their already existing journal and book collection on ScienceDirect.



Global ScienceDirect usage data shows that **75% of visits** to a Reference Module on ScienceDirect are also accompanied by a visit to a journal.

“We want and need to provide the best quality of content that we can to our students and faculty. Elsevier is one of the publishers that produces that high-quality content,” says George Machovec, Executive Director of the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries. Although turnaway data is often considered a key factor when it comes to eBook purchases, Levine-Clark insists that several factors ultimately came to inform their decision to go ahead with their purchase of Books on ScienceDirect, including:

- Balancing faculty requests with building a strong, comprehensive collection
- Budget considerations and shared buy-in
- A desire to gain access to a wider selection of titles in perpetuity (including more foundational content available from Major Reference Works and Book Series, which they purchased covering the years from 2008-2018)
- A platform to search across and link between both journal and book content via one robust, feature-rich platform



Lessons learned from usage & turnaway data

While usage data may not be the only criteria for decision-making when it comes to eBooks, it's certainly helpful information to have and will no doubt help to inform future purchases by the Colorado Alliance. As Levine-Clark states, "the more experience we have with a wider range of types of collections, the better decisions we can make going forward. We can start to gain a better understanding of the context within which our usage is happening in order to better inform renewals and future purchases."

More experience has also led to a better understanding of turnaway usage data. In particular with eBooks, certain limitations in current search tools and workflows may mean that researchers do not easily find eBook content; turnaway data, therefore, may not accurately reflect true demand for eBooks which may in fact be higher than suggested in some cases. Despite low turnaway data at some schools in the Colorado Alliance, higher usage post-purchase of the same eBook titles suggests that easier accessibility of titles is indeed very important.

Elsevier's own research confirms this last point beyond the Colorado Alliance. Based on a 4-year analysis of ScienceDirect data, it's been found that, on average, turnaway titles get three times more usage within the year following their acquisition. The Alliance has also noticed some other interesting usage results at several of their member sites. Most schools are already showing strong usage of their new collection, with some highly specialized schools, such as the Colorado School of Mines, also showing strong usage outside their recognized niche area; a great example of how content that wouldn't have been accessible without the Alliance deal is nevertheless proving very useful for their research.

In addition, smaller schools within the Alliance that would not have been able to afford the collection on their own are also benefiting from having access to the same collection of titles; eBooks at these schools show very high usage relative to the user population, helping to increase the value of the consortia deal even further.

What's next for the Alliance?

In addition to more traditional marketing tactics aimed at increasing awareness of new titles available through the Alliance, Levine-Clark suggests that having access to such a widespread collection also offers opportunities not previously explored, such as having faculty assign subscribed eBooks for their courses instead of having students purchase unsubscribed titles. Increasing the usage of subscribed titles also helps, of course, to increase the value of their subscription by ultimately decreasing the cost per use.

Advice for others?

When asked whether he has any advice for other institutes or consortia looking to purchase eBooks, Levine-Clark replies: "Do it! Every institute has to start somewhere."

He argues that a critical mass of content is key, both to ensure that users have access to the content they need as well as to ensure that the titles you ultimately subscribe to don't get lost in your catalogue collection.

6,307

The number of Books accessed globally on ScienceDirect each day.

It's also important, he adds, to mix and match different purchase models and access types and to really understand the pros and cons of each within the context of your own situation. Whereas a larger package may allow for a relatively low cost per title and perpetual access with more stability, it can sometimes mean less choice in terms of individual title selection.

Levine-Clark is, of course, careful to recognize that the circumstances surrounding each eBook purchase can be different. In their own experience, the Alliance has sometimes made purchases in order to capitalize on opportunity; at other times, purchases have been more demand-driven. He argues that mixing and matching purchase and access types is key as each approach offers its own advantages. Ultimately, however, it's always about finding the best way to provide users with the best content so that they can excel in their work and drive the research forward.

Conclusion

There's no "one size fits all" approach when it comes to eBooks, but their value for researchers at all stages of the research workflow is clear. The Alliance recognized this as far back as 1999 and, over the years, has steadily built a collection of multiple content types across a variety of publishers and aggregators in order to best support their researchers' needs, both now and in the future.



ScienceDirect

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