

Subscription Agents and Journals: The Basics

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“What are the differences and similarities for subscription agents, EBSCO and Swets?”

In an effort to answer this question, I asked a number of nonprofit publishers and technical/scientific librarians. At the end of my comments are a glossary of terms and an abridged summary of replies from respondents. This survey is anecdotal and not a scientifically valid sample, but you will find it rich in information on the murky subject of library subscription agents.

OBSERVATIONS

- It appears that to a large extent technology has moved the traditional subscription agent into the role of an abstracting and information service (A & I). This new electronic role is beneficial for the publisher as this service allows more readers to find a publisher's journals when researching through systematic citations.
- For the most part, the survey respondents viewed these two subscription agents as interchangeable and with overlapping services. EBSCO says it serves customers in 200 countries, whereas Swets claims 160 countries. Several explained how Ingenta differs and also cited some difficulties with Ingenta's interface.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Sign up with both EBSCO and Swets as the nonexclusive subscription agents for your journals, but also keep Ingenta. Since all three vendors serve different library customers, it is best to cover all your bases in reaching the library markets.
- Always study the license offered by the subscription agent. As a general rule, never sign an exclusive agreement with a vendor. Ensure that there is a provision for cancellation. Most importantly have your publishing law attorney review any licenses submitted by subscription agents.

- Subscribe to *Against the Grain*, <http://www.against-the-grain.com/d/Subscribe>. ATG is a newsletter for librarians and publishers with excellent information on the distribution, rights, and technology of selling to the library market.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Abstracting and Indexing Services (A&I) analyze, and in some cases summarize, the information content of recorded knowledge and provide systematic access to published materials, making their work invaluable to librarians and researchers in all fields. (Bodian's Publishing Desk Reference) "Abstracting and Indexing" and "Bibliographic" services are synonymous except that one creates an abstract. All generally provide a link to the referenced article.

Content Aggregators (CA) are secondary distributors of content, usually in an electronically searchable format. CAs acquire the electronic rights to distribute via a licensing agreement from copyright owners (the licensors), usually the original publisher. CAs pay royalties to the licensor.

Indexing is the listing or mentioning or referring to a journal, paper, article or some other scientific or scholarly literature by an A & I Service.

Subscription Agents (SA) offer print and electronic subscription services to publishers. SAs distribute journals electronically in a full text, searchable format and provide convenient online access to academic and special libraries, corporations and the government. Examples of SAs are Swets and EBSCO.

COMMENT FROM RESPONDENTS

Publisher, Technical Society, Atlanta

We don't use Ingenta or anyone else for our academic journal. We just publish in house and sell subscriptions from our site. EBSCO and SWETS resell for us. For our trade magazines we use Notebook, but that is just digital distribution to our subscribers.

Librarian SUNY Maritime College

I'm not sure if you are speaking about what we refer to as "subscription services," which are the middle men for libraries. It may seem extraneous for the publisher, but for the librarians they help to streamline paperwork and the subscription process. Here at Maritime, the majority of our subscriptions are done via EBSCO.

Your best bet to prevent infringement is authentication via an IP address OR username password...although IP is preferable for most. Many libraries use proxy servers with IP authentication, which prevents infringement. I'm not sure if all of the orgs that you mention are able to put you on a platform electronically. For sure, I know that Ingenta does this...you may have to speak with reps at each of the organizations.

Engineering Librarian, Midwestern University (recently Retired)

EBSCO and Swets continue to refashion themselves into providers as well as subscription agents and business models blur. Ingenta is a newer company and I haven't paid attention to all that they do. If there are no substantial negatives to signing up for all what's to lose? Years of content backfiles, current embargo periods, and searching capabilities matter to customers.

Technical Publisher, Suburban Philadelphia

EBSCO and SWETS Blackwell are pretty much the same, namely order takers. They receive the subscription from the library, forward it to us, and we fulfill sub-

scription by sending to the subscriber's IP number. Sign a nonexclusive with both EBSCO and SWETS Blackwell. Pay only a 10% royalty.

Head, Science & Technology Department, Midwestern University Library

In my opinion, Ingenta is the single most confusing interface we have had to deal with. They are busy trying to encourage individual researchers to purchase journal articles that their library does not have a subscription to....and it can be hard to tell which articles will be available full text and which will require purchase—even if you use their system fairly regularly. Even location of specific options is very difficult to find on the screen compared to a lot of other interfaces.

EBSCO as an entity is a bit confusing. EBSCOhost is an interface that typically provides journals as part of a larger package, e.g., within Academic Search Elite or Academic Search Premier. Libraries can't purchase a "single" journal—they would be getting a database of journals. I do not know if EBSCO has a separate interface that provides individual journal subscriptions through them...that are not part of EBSCOhost. I do like the EBSCOhost interface quite well. It was very easy for our researchers to learn/use. Contains excellent options for directly connecting to full text and/or downloading or emailing full text of specific articles that they like. I also like the option to sign up for Table of Contents alerts when new journal issues are published.

I am much less familiar with Swets Blackwell. We do have a number of electronic journal subscriptions through our Blackwell Synergy package purchase. I rarely get questions from researchers who have difficulty navigating the Blackwell Synergy interface....which I can't say about a number of other interfaces. We have a very small collection of naval engineering journals—but we do have "Naval Engineers Journal" because it came as part of the entire Synergy package that we bought. Blackwell journals are covered nicely by Google

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Scholar—which a LOT of our researchers prefer over traditional databases like Academic Search or Compendex. I am unsure whether or not the EBSCO hosted journals can be found through Google Scholar.

My personal favorite interface for electronic journals is Highwire Press. They tend to focus more on life sciences right now, but I believe they are expanding and continually looking for more journals to offer. They do an excellent job of easy search and easy interface--and they offer options for doing cited reference searching--which most other interfaces do not offer.

<http://highwire.stanford.edu/>

I know it is more work—but from the point of view of libraries and researchers—I would encourage you to check into the possibility of negotiating your journal content being added to more than one provider's interface. Some vendors like EBSCOhost might try to negotiate for exclusive rights—but I know they also offer some of the same journals that other journal providers also offer (thereby giving libraries more flexibility in options for access). From an engineering point of view—I don't know that we have any one ubiquitous interface that offers electronic journal access. A number of non-AIP society journals are becoming available through Scitation via the American Institute of Physics at <http://scitation.aip.org/> and there are a wide variety of societies that put out their own unique interface for electronic journals—e.g., IEEE and ASCE. Elsevier does offer a number of science journals through their ScienceDirect platform—at an extremely exorbitant price. You would not be helping your cause to negotiate your content being available through ScienceDirect as fewer libraries would be able to afford the access.

At one point, Allen Press (based in the U.S.) was actively courting scientific societies—offering to provide society journal content electronically. One of their advantages is that they have made their author submission process entirely electronic, which has also decreased the

amount of time from submission until publication for articles. See their website for more info:

<http://www.allenpress.com/>

Serials Acquisitions Librarian, Associate Head, Acquisitions & Licensing Services, Major Technical University in the Northeast.

Ingenta is actually a bit different from EBSCO and Swets. They all host ejournals (among other services each provides), but the way individuals and libraries access those services is different. When I subscribe to your journal and have access on Ingenta, I pay my subscription fee to the publisher (probably via my subscription agent), and I pay nothing to Ingenta to use their service. However, to access your ejournal via EBSCO or Swets, I have to subscribe to their hosting platform in addition to the subscription fee itself. Here at MIT, we've never found either of those platforms to be particularly useful to us. If you were to move your ejournals solely to one or both of those platforms, we'd be unable to access them.

It's possible that for them, subscribing to EBSCOhost or SwetsWise Online Journals (or whatever they are calling these services these days) is the best way to get content. You should check with libraries in those countries to see what the environment is for them.

Going with EBSCO and Swets might be a good idea for SNAME; I can't say for sure. But I can say that it wouldn't be a good idea to just go with EBSCO and Swets and forgo Ingenta. If you do that, you'll likely alienate many U.S. libraries, which I don't think would be a good idea for SNAME.

Director of Publications, West Coast Technical Society

EBSCO and SWETS produce journal aggregations that are sold to libraries as big databases. Ingenta is simply an online host on whose platform a number of online

journals are available to users who either subscribe (individually or via their libraries) or can pay to view selected articles.

From what I understand, some libraries, particularly smaller ones, like to buy databases because they get a lot for the money.

Some journal publishers are withdrawing from their licenses with aggregators because those pay only a royalty share instead of the full subscription price. This is a strategic issue. It would help to know who is already subscribing to the journal and try to assess the market for the journal based on the size of the library.

Technical Publisher, Columbus OH

I have had agreements in the past with all three of these services. I haven't been very much involved in these decisions lately since we now partner with Wiley-Blackwell for our journals and books. That being said, I never could figure out exactly what the differences were. I know that I had the best experience with EBSCO--I believe that Wiley-Blackwell continues to distribute our content via that platform.

Before going to Wiley-Blackwell, we used Ingenta to build our online journals. Generally, I was pleased with Ingenta, but can't really remember too much about SWETS Blackwell.

Since partnering with Wiley-Blackwell in 2005, we have taken the philosophy that greater availability means more citations and more use, which means more stable library subscriptions. It seems to be working. I would recommend that you go with EBSCO to start and then explore adding SWETS in a year. They may be able to tell you exactly why their service reaches different markets than EBSCO and Ingenta.

Medical Publisher, Dallas TX

I don't think you have to limit yourself to a particular sub agent. We receive orders from both Swets and EBSCO. I am not sure who is more dominant (i.e., preferred by customers) in Asia. I am not familiar with Ingenta.

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