

**R**esearch report

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# **ALPSP survey of librarians on factors in journal cancellation**

**Mark Ware**

Mark Ware Consulting Ltd

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# ALPSP survey of librarians on factors in journal cancellation

This document reports a study commissioned by ALPSP of the factors contributing to journal cancellations. The study consisted of an online survey which was completed by 340 librarians recruited from library-oriented listservs.

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## Summary and conclusions

The question of whether self-archiving of preprints and/or postprints by journal authors is likely to have a significant impact on journal subscription numbers is currently a hotly debated issue of considerable policy importance for publishers. The moves by funding bodies and some institutions to request or require authors to deposit postprints has given more urgency to this issue as the archives are now likely to grow in number and, more importantly, in their content. This study was commissioned by ALPSP to ascertain the major factors contributing to journal cancellations, and thus to provide some new information for a debate that has inevitably so far been short of data.

The study consisted of an online questionnaire. The wording was originally developed by ALPSP and Mark Ware Consulting, and then subject to review by a number of experienced librarians. The sample was obtained by posting requests to a number of listservs such as liblicense and SerialST. The sample was thus a self-selected one from a non-random group (those who chose to join the listservs) and this does represent a limitation of the study. Nonetheless, a good response of 340 completed questionnaires was received, which roughly estimated represents a response rate of 4–7%, perhaps reflecting the degree of interest in the topic.

## Results

The main findings of the study are:

1. The 340 responses were mainly from academic institutions (more than 80%), with 66% from universities carrying out both research and teaching. Only 8% were from corporate libraries. They were evenly spread among small, medium and large libraries. The subjects covered included all of Science & Technology, Medical & Healthcare, Humanities & Social Sciences, and Business & Management (and other, e.g. art). It turns out that there are few statistically significant differences between these demographic groupings and for that reason most of the results are given for the sample as a whole (p. 6).
2. The process of journal cancellations is a varied one but typically entails a consultative process involving both librarians and faculty (or other library patrons). In most cases, the librarian is primarily responsible for initiating the decision to cancel a journal (e.g. via an analysis of its usage or other factors) and for the final decision to cancel (p. 7).
3. The typical cancellation process therefore follows a path of analysis, consultation, review and finalisation. The consultation may involve the librarian proposing candidates for cancellation, or providing data but asking patrons to suggest cancellations. It may also involve reader surveys of varying sophistication (p. 8).
4. The three most important factors used to determine journals for cancellation, in declining order of importance, are that the faculty no longer require it (i.e. relevance to research or teaching programme), usage and price. Next, availability of the content via open access (OA) archives and availability via aggregators were ranked equal fourth, but some way behind the first three factors. The journal's impact factor and availability via delayed OA were ranked relatively unimportant. Other important factors were the perceived quality, importance or centrality of the journal, and the protection from cancellation afforded some journals either by inclusion in some kind of package, or because of local faculty involvement (e.g. on the editorial board) (p. 10).
5. Taking these factors in turn, for price the most important factors were the absolute price and the percentage increase. Price per use, although

- mentioned quite frequently in the free-text responses, was only scored as of middling importance, while price per article or price per page was hardly used at all (p. 11).
6. With usage, the most important data were the online statistics provided by the publisher or intermediary. The library's own online statistics were ranked significantly lower, while print usage (perhaps not surprisingly) was the least important (p. 12).
  7. The important factors affecting whether inclusion in an aggregation product would play a part in determining if a journal was a candidate for cancellation were, in declining order, the length of any embargo, the extent of the archive in the aggregation and the promptness with which new material was added. The degree of functionality of the product was relatively unimportant. It was clear from the free-text responses that one of the key reasons that librarians do not regard aggregations as substitutes for journal subscriptions is the perceived lack of stability of the content and lack of access to previously removed content (p. 13).
  8. Availability of content via delayed open access was not an important factor in journal cancellations, as we saw above. From examination of all kinds of embargoed content (whether from delayed OA, self-archiving or aggregations), it is clear that the embargo has to be very short indeed to compete with a subscription: for 82% it had to be 3 months or less, and for 92% it had to be 6 months or less (p. 13). The length of the acceptable embargo varies with subject, with embargoes being less acceptable in STM journals. Embargoes were also more tolerable for peripheral journals than for those in core topics (p. 14).
  9. With regard to OA archives, there was a great deal of support for the idea that they would not directly impact journal subscriptions in the following data:
    - a. 97% of respondents saw an archived copy of the publisher's final PDF as an acceptable substitute for the journal, but this fell to 39% for a postprint and only 9% for a preprint (p. 15).
    - b. For most librarians (76%) the archive would have to contain over 90% of the journal's content, and 48% wanted 100% before they would see it as a potential substitute for a journal (p. 15).
    - c. Furthermore, only 16% of respondents currently have estimates of the overlap between their journals and archives (p. 16), and only 31% had plans to introduce systems to measure this overlap (p. 16).
  10. A key question for this study was: if librarians did not see the free availability of the content on an OA archive as a good reason to cancel a journal, why not? The most frequently cited reasons, in declining order, were (p. 18):
    - a. Concerns about the long-term availability of the free archives
    - b. Concerns about the completeness and integrity of the archives
    - c. Faculty demand for 'the real journal'
    - d. Pre/postprints not seen as an adequate substitute for the final journal article.
  11. In the final section of the questionnaire, we turned from gathering *facts* about the present systems of managing journal holdings to the librarians' *opinions* about how these would change in the future. First we asked them to reconsider the possible factors used to determine cancellation (see point 4 above), but this time to say how important they thought they would be in 5 years' time. The same four factors were seen to be likely to be the most important, but the ranking and degree of importance of some had changed:
    - a. Price was seen as becoming a more important factor in the future and moved to the first-ranked position: 98% said it would be an important or more important factor

- b. Although availability via OA archives was still ranked fourth (and well behind the first three factors), respondents thought that its importance would increase substantially, with 81% saying it would be an important or very important factor (p. 20).
12. We asked respondents to sum up their views: what impact would repositories have on journal holdings? Was it too early to tell? Why or why not? (p. 20):
- a. A small majority (54%) said it was too early to tell
  - b. Of those prepared to 'stick their necks out', 32% said they thought there would be no impact, three times as many as those who thought there would be some impact (11%).

## Conclusions

What does all this mean for the debate on whether or not pre/postprint repositories will reduce journal subscriptions? Perhaps not surprisingly, given the early stage of development of self-archiving in most fields, this study gives no conclusive answer. In support of the view that self-archiving will not harm journals we can cite:

1. Repositories are clearly not seen by librarians as a substitute for properly managed journal holdings: they point to concerns over long-term availability, stability, completeness and integrity; the faculty want 'the real journal'; embargoes of even 3 months are a major obstacle; and postprints (let alone preprints) are not seen as an adequate substitute for the journal article.
2. Furthermore, the large majority of librarians do not know whether the content of archives overlaps with their holdings, and most do not plan to introduce systems to measure this.
3. Availability via OA archives was ranked a long way behind the needs of faculty, usage and price in determining cancellations.
4. Three times as many respondents thought there would be no impact on holdings compared with those that thought there would be some impact.

On the other hand, publishers might be worried by the following:

5. 53% say that availability via OA archives is an important or a very important factor in determining cancellations now, and this rises to 81% in the next 5 years.
6. The clear and growing emphasis on measuring usage of journals via the publishers' or intermediaries' statistics will be a clear concern for publishers, because there is some evidence (e.g. from physics) that a well-used archive can very substantially reduce usage at the journal site.

At present the picture seems to be that this impact on usage does not lead to journal cancellations for the reasons given above: the faculty still want the real journal, librarians want to maintain holdings, a postprint is not seen as an adequate substitute, etc. Usage figures are interpreted within a field, so all high-energy physics journals, for instance, will be affected alike. There is no evidence in this study that core journals are under any threat from repositories. There are some hints, however, that very peripheral journals might find some pressure, and for that reason the threat might be felt more by aggregators than by journals, but only when there was very comprehensive coverage by repositories of the literature.