Evaluating Electronic Resources: Criteria Used by Librarians

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EVALUATING ELECTRONIC RESOURCES: CRITERIA USED BY LIBRARIANS

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, the proliferation of information technology has lead to the development of scores of electronic resources. With the popularity and increased affordability of computer-assisted legal research, the legal community, in particular, has seen a vast number of electronic products and services flooding the market. Faced with this barrage, information professionals have begun developing systematized approaches to evaluating electronic resources to ensure informed decision-making when contemplating which products to purchase.

Traditionally, librarians have been instrumental in developing formalized criteria and guidelines for evaluating potential purchases. These guidelines, often called "collection development policies," provide established criteria to guide the decision-making process in determining which books and other materials should be purchased and added to the library's collection. With the advent of digital products, librarians augmented these often print-based guidelines to include evaluative criteria for electronic resources.

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The term "Electronic Resources" is defined in this paper as those electronic products and services encompassing digital collections of information organized for effective retrieval by researchers utilizing information technology. It includes: 1) Subscription and other fee-based databases and services accessed on remote servers via Internet connections, and 2) CD-ROMs and other informational products installed on a single computer workstation or residing on a network. Although many of the same criteria can be used to evaluate other types of software and free World Wide Web sites, the focus of this discussion is on the evaluation of licensed, subscription or other fee-based, electronic resources as defined here.

This paper will present sample criteria used by librarians when evaluating electronic resources. It is meant to provide practical information for any professional to use. Under each heading, criteria are presented alphabetically with no other rank or weight attached to the order. Each criterion is followed by a series of questions, which assist in defining the criterion, as well as provide material that consumers can use when actually evaluating products.

I.   SAMPLE EVALUATIVE CRITERIA FOR ELECTRONIC RESOURCE SELECTION[1]:

A.   Content Criteria

Although colorful graphics and multi-media extras can be eye-catching, consumers need to focus on the resource's overall substantive content during the evaluation process. The following criteria can assist evaluators in effectively examining content.

Accuracy: Is the information contained in the resource error-free? Are the sources of the information clearly identified and presented to the user?

Additional Linked Resources: Does the resource contain hypertext or other links to additional resources? Does the publisher or vendor keep these links up to date? Is it explicit when the user is leaving the resource site to connect to another website or server?[2] Are these linked resources useful or do they add clutter to the content?

Archiving: Archiving concerns the storing of current data and the future availability of that data to the user. With the dynamic nature of

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1. The lists of criteria have been compiled from various sources contained in the Appendix: Additional Resources, particularly Jonathan Lord & Bart Ragon, *Working Together to Develop Electronic Collections*, COMPUTERS IN LIBR., May 2001, at 40.

2. Lord & Regan, *supra* note 1, at 40.

databases where information can be changed and/or updated frequently, this may be an important consideration. Will the user have a need to access previously published content? Will that information be archived for future availability? How far back does the archiving extend? What commitment is the vendor making in continuing to offer the archived content? Are users themselves able to archive content of interest?

Authority: Who is responsible for creating, compiling, or publishing the content? What kind of reputation does this entity possess? Is the resource and/or the information contained in the resource peer-reviewed?[3] Does the publisher provide citations to the sources of information contained in the resource?

Currency: Is the resource updated on a regular basis to ensure that it is providing up to date information? Is the data timely enough to support research needs? Are there other resources which provide more current information?

Quality: Is the resource organized in an effective way? Does it contain features, such as directories, indexes, browse functions, search interfaces, user assistance functionality, and other effective organizational elements to allow for successful use of the product?

Reviews: What kind of reviews has the resource or vendor received in electronic product reviewing publications? What are other practitioners saying about their experiences with the product? [A selected list of Product Review publications is included in a subsequent section of this paper.]

Scope: Does the resource provide the depth and level of detail needed? Is the information comprehensive enough for the needed purpose?

Unique Content: Does the resource contain unique content or does it duplicate information available either in print or through another electronic product? Is there a need or reason for the repetition, such as the unique searching functionality or increased currency of data of the resource? What are the advantages of this particular resource over the others?[4]

Value-Added Features: Does the resource contain value-added features, such as explanations and interpretations of text, video clips and multimedia elements, and other additional features, which enhance the content and the user's interface with the product?[5] Does the resource allow for interactivity between the user and the resource? Can users communicate with professionals associated with the resource who can assist with search strategies and provide additional guidance on using the

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3. Id.
4. Id.
5. Id.

product?

B. Access Criteria

Access issues revolve around the specific user's ability to connect to and successfully interact with the electronic product. Other important access issues revolve around contracts, licensing, and pricing.

Connectivity: Connectivity requirements are based on the mode of access, which can include direct installation of the product on an individual workstation, installation on a local network, or access through a remote server via an Internet connection. Will users be able to easily install and/or connect to the resource from a convenient location? What kind of security issues may impact connectivity? Will access involve the need for special passwords or other user authentication? Many vendors now use IP address authentication to grant access to proprietary databases accessed on remote servers over the Internet. Computers connected to the Internet have unique IP (Internet Protocol) addresses, which take a numeric form. Consumers can provide vendors with a range of these addresses, which the vendor can use in providing access to the secured website. Additional connectivity questions include the following: How many simultaneous users can connect to the resource and how does this impact the planned use of the product? What other connection restrictions, such as limited connection times, may impact the user?

Licensing: Does the product require a complex licensing agreement or contract? What specifications and rights does the agreement provide? How negotiable is the licensing agreement?[6] Will the licensing terms be acceptable? Can pricing be negotiated as part of the contract?

Pricing: What kind of pricing and/or other fees are involved? Depending on the resource, a one-time purchase price, an annual subscription cost, and/or a transactional fee structure may be employed. Transactional fee structures can include a fee charged by individual search or transaction, charged by the number of databases included in a search, or charged by the total time connected to the resource. If options are available, consumers should explore which alternatives are most economical. A resource with low or limited potential usage may prove less costly with a transactional fee structure, while a heavily used resource may prove more economical with an annual one-time charge.

Reporting: Does the resource provide any reporting functionality to monitor usage and track the projects benefiting from the resource? This

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6. Id.

information is particularly important for those needing to charge expenses to individual clients or projects, as well as those interested in the overall cost effectiveness of an electronic resource.

Search Functionality: Will users be able to successfully navigate through the resource finding the information that they need? Is there an effective search engine or other useful means of information retrieval?[7] How comprehensive is the searching functionality? Does the search function retrieve all of the relevant information?

Trial Period Availability: Will the vendor allow for a trial period or other low cost test period in which to examine the product and its functionality before making a purchase commitment?[8]

Usability: Is the resource intuitive? Will the user easily become adept at using the resource or will substantial training be necessary? Does the vendor provide user support, training, and/or product user manuals?

C.   Technological Criteria

When evaluating electronic products, practitioners need to consider the functionality of the product with their current computer and system configurations. The need for additional hardware and software, and the costs associated with that equipment should also be explored.

Auxiliary Software Requirements: Are there any additional software requirements necessary?   What costs may be associated with these requirements?

Documentation: Does the vendor provide adequate documentation for the installation and maintenance of the resource? Does this material actually provide useful information? Is the documentation in a format convenient for the user?[9]

Hardware And Other Equipment Needs: What computer hardware and/or ancillary equipment is necessary for the electronic resource to perform at adequate levels? How will use of the resource impact other programs running on the network or desktop? Do the data elements and other structures fall within industry standards?[10] How will system and equipment upgrades affect the functionality of the resource?

Interactivity: Do interactive features, such as search interfaces, forms, and other interactive elements requiring input from the user, function

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7. Id.
8. Id.
9. Id.
10. Id.

adequately or do they frequently result in errors?[11]

Stability: From a systems perspective, is the resource stable? Are elements of the resource frequently "busy," or do they freeze or "lock up" the computer desktop, and/or take excessive time to load? Does the use of the resource frequently result in system errors or other hardware/software problems?

Technical Support Needed: What kind of technical support is necessary to install and/or maintain the resource? How easy or difficult will it be to update or upgrade to subsequent versions of the product? Does the vendor provide any kind of technical support or assistance? What is the vendor's track record in regard to customer service? Does the vendor provide a toll-free telephone number in which to contact technical support liaisons?[12]

Multimedia Considerations: Does the resource contain visual effects and other sophisticated graphics, which detract from, rather than enhance, the effectiveness of the product?[13] Will certain multimedia design elements cause problems for users with less sophisticated workstations, which may not have the capacity to run these features?

Networkability: Does the locally installed resource have the ability to be networked if so desired?[14]

II. USE OF PRODUCT REVIEWS

Various methods can be employed in an effort to uncover information relative to each of the criterion listed above. Methods can include: testing the product itself (highly desirable), perusing product promotional literature, contacting vendor sales and marketing personnel, speaking with colleagues who can share their anecdotal experience with a product, and reading professional publications containing electronic product reviews.

Product reviews contained in respected, unbiased publications can be a valued source of information for the consumer. Generally, a review will contain a concise overview of the product's features and benefits. More importantly, it should identify the critical issues of greatest interest to the consumer. Further, reviews will often compare and contrast similar products, all of which might be under consideration. They may even reveal the existence of an alternative product not currently under the consumer's purview. This information should assist in answering the questions

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11. Id.
12. Id.
13. Id.
14. Id.

presented above and allow the practitioner to begin formulating an informed opinion.

In addition to print resources, there are now a number of websites, which also provide product reviews of electronic resources. The following examples represent a selection of print and web resources containing product reviews and/or discussions of electronic resources of interest to librarians and other information professionals. While the majority of these publications are geared for the legal practitioner, several general publications dealing with information resources and technology are also included.

III.   WEB AND PRINT PUBLICATIONS FOR PRODUCT REVIEWS: A SELECTED
LIST

American Bar Association, Legal Technology Resource Center
http://www.abanet.org/tech/ltrc/home.html
The ABA's Legal Technology Resource Center contains a comprehensive collection of information technology resources, including information on electronic products for legal research.

Information Today
Publisher: Information Today, Inc.
This print publication contains news, information, and reviews of electronic information products and services for all varieties of libraries and information centers.

Law Library Resource Exchange,
http://www.llrx.com/
LLRX.com provides news, information, and product reviews on a wide-range of online legal research and technology-related issues.

Law Office Computing
Publisher: James Publishing, Inc.
Web version: http://www.lawofficecomputing.com/
This publication contains news, product reviews, and information covering many areas of the legal technology field.

Law Technology News
Publisher: American Lawyer Media Inc.
Web version: http://www.lawtechnews.com/

This publication contains information on products, systems and services for the legal professional.

Legal Information Alert
Publisher: Alert Publications Inc.
This newsletter provides current awareness reading for legal researchers, including news, information, and product reviews.

Virtual Acquisition Shelf & News Desk,
http://www.resourceshelf.blogspot.com/
This web site compiles news, information, and reviews on electronic resources of interest to information professionals in all fields.

CONCLUSION

The evaluative criteria presented in this paper have proven useful to librarians evaluating electronic resources for possible purchase. As part of the evaluation process, some librarians have developed sophisticated matrices, which allow them to rate and/or rank a product relative to a particular criterion. These systems provide established weights and measures for various criteria and the level of importance they carry.

Based on an institution's individual needs and circumstances, certain criteria may carry less weight and be of less concern than others. Often, evaluators may be willing to sacrifice an individual criterion due to a much weightier concern. To this end, trade-offs become inevitable.

However, evaluative programs need not be excessive, complicated or cumbersome. The use of established criteria, in some fashion, as part of an overall process, succeeds in creating an objective environment in which to evaluate products and ensure informed decision-making.

APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books

ARLENE BIELEFIELD & LAWRENCE CHEESEMAN, INTERPRETING AND NEGOTIATING LICENSING AGREEMENTS: A GUIDEBOOK FOR THE LIBRARY, RESEARCH, AND TEACHING PROFESSIONS (1999).
VICKI L. GREGORY, SELECTING AND MANAGING ELECTRONIC RESOURCES (2000).
VIRTUALLY YOURS: MODELS FOR MANAGING ELECTRONIC RESOURCES AND SERVICES (Peggy Johnson & Bonnie MacEwan eds.,

1999).

DIANE KOVACS, BUILDING ELECTRONIC LIBRARY COLLECTIONS (2000).

Journal Articles

Trisha L. Davis, *The Evolution of Selection Activities for Electronic Resources*, 45 LIBR. TRENDS 391 (1997).

Diana C. Jaque, *Evaluating Electronic Resources*, 24 LIBR. COLLECTIONS, ACQUISITIONS, & TECHNICAL SERVICES 420 (2000).

Bobbie Studwell, *Evaluating Electronic Resources*, AALL SPECTRUM, July 1998 at 10.

Web Sites/Publications

Yale University Library, Council on Library & Information Resources, LIBLICENSE: LICENSING DIGITAL INFORMATION: A RESOURCE FOR LIBRARIANS, *at* http://www.library.yale.edu/~llicense/ (last updated Sept. 18, 2002).

University of California Libraries, Collection Development Committee, PRINCIPLES FOR ACQUIRING & LICENSING INFORMATION IN DIGITAL FORMATS (MAY 22, 1996), *at* http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Info/principles.html