Pay-Per-View: a Promising Model of E-Articles Subscription for Middle/Small Sized Academic Libraries in the Digital Age

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Abstract
In the digital age, individual articles rather than journals have become the fundamental units that researchers want. The utilization of the Pay-Per-View (PPV) model for e-articles as an alternative to journal subscription has become a great challenge to both journal providers and academic libraries. For libraries, “big deal” subscriptions, which conveniently provided library patrons with greatly expanded e-resources, have been consuming most of their budgets. As unbundling the big deal was considered as a cost efficient way to solve the serials crisis, some libraries began using PPV, the “little deal,” to try to keep the same level of accessibility to e-resources. In the spring of 2011, St. John’s University Library experimentally implemented PPV by purchasing Wiley-Blackwell tokens after unbundling its package. The usage analysis showed the achievement of these goals in most aspects, but we also experienced some negative consequences. After a broad literature review of the topic, discussions in professional listservs and telephone conversations with other librarians, we realized that using the PPV model involves not only the librarians’ efforts, it also needs the full support of the journal providers. This article will explore the new issues and consequences, both positive and negative, of the use of mediated and unmediated PPV models by academic libraries. I will compare the existing PPV offerings and policies from journal providers, and suggest improvements that will help libraries implement PPV.

Key words: Pay-Per-View (PPV); Package Subscriptions; Unbundle Big Deal; Serials Crisis
Introduction

In this digital age, articles rather than journals have become the fundamental units that researchers want. (Gyllensvard, 2009). Publishers, realizing this change, have been providing Pay-Per-View (PPV) to researchers as a way of purchasing journal articles, if that journal is not subscribed to in the traditional way, either by a library or by an individual. Thus, a yearly subscription of journal titles can be replaced by PPV for temporary ownership of individual articles. This “just-in-time” purchase of e-articles, as a new way of subscription, becomes a challenge to libraries, which are used to the traditional “just-in-case” subscriptions for their journal collections.

Some libraries, especially middle/small sized academic libraries, have been using PPV as an alternative subscription for two reasons: budgetary limitations and service requirements. In recent decades “big deal” package subscriptions, which conveniently provided library patrons with greatly expanded e-resources, have been consuming most of a library’s budget. Unbundling the “big deals” and adopting the Pay-Per-View model, (called the “Little Deal” by Bosch, S., & Henderson, K. (2012) in their recent article published in Library Journal) would provide a creative solution for libraries in solving the serial crisis.

St. John’s University Library began to use PPV, experimentally, in the spring semester of 2011. We implemented the unmediated model of PPV with Wiley-Blackwell and, at the same time, unbundled the package subscription of its Humanities and Social Sciences journals. Our first-hand experience of the PPV model uncovered some new and unexpected issues, as well as some negative outcomes. We subsequently engaged in a broad literature review of this topic, and consulted with other librarians involved in similar trials, to explore possible solutions for better using PPV for our libraries.

This article provides detailed analysis of a case study of using PPV at St. John’s, together with my further exploration of different models used by other academic libraries in the United States. I will then compare the existing PPV offerings and policies of various journal providers, and finally, as a Serials Librarian, I will suggest improvements that will help libraries implement PPV successfully. Hopefully, publishers will heed the voices of librarians and provide the institutions with reasonable and affordable PPV policies in the digital age.

Implementing PPV at St. John’s University Library
For the past several years, our Library’s annual 8-12% budget increase for journals has been discontinued. Actually, the total allocation for periodicals has declined since budget cuts were requested university-wide. At the same time, the price of periodicals has increased by at least 4.5% or more annually. Obviously, decreasing funds are unable to cover increasing costs. And worse still, more and more of the periodical budget has been consumed by “big deal” subscriptions. In past several years, we spent more than 70% of our periodicals budget on packages. Thus, to unbundle the “big deal” was the most urgent task.

In the spring semester of 2011, we unbundled Wiley-Blackwell’s Humanities and Social Sciences package and totally canceled our subscription to 400 Wiley-Blackwell titles. After carefully analyzing the usage statistics for each title, we kept only 40 core journals for 2011. We then used the PPV model as a supplemental subscription to provide our library patrons access to all the other Wiley-Blackwell journals.

The PPV model was initiated in April of 2011, one of the busiest months for the use of library materials. We bought 1000 tokens for all Wiley articles and Wiley gave us extra 5 tokens free of charge for testing purpose. Our original intention was to use the most restricted option of mediate control, called “SuperUser Control” by Wiley. We hoped the “SuperUser,” (made up of selected library employees), upon receiving email requests from library patrons, would retrieve the full text articles by using tokens, and then email back to patrons immediately during the library’s open hours. By using this mediated model, we expected to achieve the following results:

1. Provide an almost seamless service of retrieving and forwarding articles to our users;

2. Restrict the use of tokens only to the St. John’s community (using St. John’s email addresses only);

3. Avoid using tokens for articles that are already present in available databases or acquired archives;

4. Record detailed usage statistics for further analysis.

Unfortunately, Wiley’s system of a “SuperUser” could not provide us with email communications between patrons and the library. It was designed for use only with assigned user names and passwords, by individuals such as faculty members. After fruitless discussions with the publisher, we gave up the mediated model and used
immediate access within our IP arrangement. This way, any user who signed onto the library’s network could spend tokens. To our patrons, PPV in this model looked no different than traditional subscriptions

Before turning on PPV, we also discussed what should be included in our A-Z e-journal list, select titles or all the available titles from Wiley. Considering the fact that prepaid tokens can be used for any article from Wiley journals, it was of little significance if we only displayed some selected titles. Users can access all Wiley titles through Google, or directly from the Wiley web site, by using the prepaid tokens to get the full text, as long as they log in using a St. John’s account. Another consideration was that, without selecting titles, we could provide users with all available materials as if we still had a “big deal”. Before turning on the PPV model, we added all Wiley titles (1930 front file and 1375 back file titles) to our link resolver, Serials Solutions.

Without any kind of control, except by IP address, 1005 tokens were used up within less than a month for articles in 304 Wiley titles. The usage statistics showed us that more than 50% (592) of the articles purchased were from journals that we didn’t have any access to previously. The other tokens were spent on the following: 221 were used for articles from the embargoed period of journal titles from databases, such as Ebsco Academic Search Premier; 51 tokens were on the current issues of previously subscribed journals; 89 were used for the earlier issues of previously subscribed journals; and 52 were used for articles that were available elsewhere in our library resources. (Weicher, 2012).

During this period, we discovered that 291 tokens (30%) were spent on systematic downloads by a user for just 2 journal titles within several hours. We discovered that there was no way to stop these unreasonable downloads, even after we requested help from Wiley. “Unmediated PPV access works like a buffet, allowing users to take what they want.” (Fisher, 2012). However, Serials Librarians, struggling with financial cuts, cannot supply the happy users with endless tokens as casinos do. We then canceled the plan of buying 3000 Wiley tokens for the fall semester of 2011.

**Some Issues to Be Noticed While Using PPV**

Our short period of PPV showed us that users were having great freedom in selecting materials from a vast range of journals. It would be impossible for small/middle sized academic library to provide the same coverage by
traditional subscriptions. On the other hand, by unbundling the package, our library was able to save almost 40% of the budget we used the previous year on Wiley titles. But before we could continue with the PPV model, we need to explore several obvious problems and new issues coming from this experiment.

The first issue is the deprivation of the librarians’ role in selecting library materials, instead, the patrons select. This seems to “diminish the role of librarians as information professionals” (Kohl, 2006). Librarians, as information specialists, are trained to pre-select materials for library collection development, by using certain standards. This is especially important in a library whose major patrons are undergraduates. PPV provides the patrons to select without libraries’ restriction/preselection. But, as Wiley publishes all peer reviewed scholarly journals, selection is not really a major factor. Librarians however, still play a very important role in selecting subjects, databases, and platforms for their patrons. We only lost the role of selecting individual titles. On the other hand, we happily realized that the usage statistics provide useful information for the future selection of journals for library collections.

Secondly, the ownership of the material is no longer perpetual for the library. Traditionally, materials acquired will be available for unrestricted use over an extended period of time. (Golderman, 2007). All PPV articles alas, are in the possession of the library for just 24 hours. And the purchased article is for one user at one time only. This brings up two considerations. First, the library loses one of its most important functions as a storehouse of knowledge. But in this electronic age, materials can be purchased or accessed from more than one resource, including databases with embargo periods, and the archives late sold to libraries at a much more reasonable price. The second consideration is that the library might repeatedly pay for the same material since late multiple users may need the same content, or the same user may retrieve again the same article after 24 hours. In our case, there were only 2 tokens spent on the same article during the implemented PPV period. For these issues, Patrick Carr well pointed out that: “librarians must compromise their ideals about perpetual access for anticipated patrons in the future for the “just-in-case” collection concept in favor of serving the real patrons at the present by this “just-in-time” subscription within a limited budget”. (Carr, 2009).

The third issue is the shift of the policing of online materials from publishers to libraries. In package subscription, a license agreement usually gives the provider the right to block access if any systematic downloads of online material occurs. (ACS and Annual Reviews blocked our access whenever there were more than 200
systematic downloads of articles from their systems). The providers would notify us immediately if someone retrieved hundreds of articles from the same journal at one time. But in our case using PPV, Wiley could not block any access by using tokens, even at our request. Since each download of an article had been prepaid by the library, the publisher has no obligation or incentive for guiding the use of tokens at all. This aspect had the most negative impact on our library and prevented our use of the unmediated PPV model.

The fourth issue involves library communication with its patrons regarding the use of unmediated PPV model to purchase e-articles. Ideally, there should be an alert before the last click for retrieving full texts, in order to avoid careless or unnecessary purchasing. The users need to receive a warning of redundant payment for the same material if they did not save or print the articles after retrieval. Considering the 52 tokens spent on articles available elsewhere, we regretted that our users were not requested to check other library resources before using the tokens. Perhaps, this issue would be more controllable if using the mediated model.

The fifth issue concerns the added administrative burden to librarians. To use a mediated model, as most libraries do at the moment, library employees may be assigned to respond to email requests, or Interlibrary Loan (ILL) staff may handle the requests. Issuing user IDs and passwords to faculty members or departments may require managerial work and some training. All these added tasks are not required with traditional journal subscriptions, or with the “big deals.” For us in Serials Departments, the new tasks would be manageable, especially considering the reduced workflow that results from the reduction of many print journals. To manage PPV, however, involves other library departments, such as the Bibliographic Instruction office, Reference Desk and ILL Department. Libraries will need to discuss the change of workflow and to have more cooperation between these different offices.

Among all the issues discussed above, perhaps our major concern was the control of token usage. Our primary goal, after all, in using PPV was to balance budget restraint with excellent patron service.

How the other libraries are dealing with the problems in using PPV

We tried to learn from others’ experience in dealing with these issues. We engaged in a broad literature review of published articles on the topic, used the professional listservs, and had telephone conversations with librarians from all over the country who used or were using PPV for their e-resources collections. The investigation showed that libraries use either mediated or unmediated access PPV models accordingly. With mediated access, libraries have better control of token usage, their budget, but with more administrative duties. Most librarians
considered the administrative burden offset by the improved financial situation. With unmediated access, users retrieve articles without knowing they are using PPV, and the library can provide a true seamless service if budget is not a problem. By selecting the PPV model best suited to individual budget situations and service requirements, most libraries were relatively satisfied with the results. The following will be the detailed information of the libraries using the PPV model in different ways:

**Unmediated Model of Using PPV**

The North Shore-Long Island Jewish Health System Libraries, serving over 43,000 users, has been using the unmediated model of PPV for all Wiley journals since 2009. As a medical library, it is required to be available 24/7 to its users, regarding to the retrieval of online materials. Because of this, Ms. Ellen Rothbaum, the Assistant Director of the Daniel Carroll Payson Medical Library, North Shore University Hospital, said she uses the unmediated model of PPV, and all articles from Wiley titles can be accessed by IP arrangement. Ms. Rothbaum monitors daily usages, and so far, only 4 cases of suspected misuse/abuse had been detected. Her health system’s Information Services security department was able to trace the IP number, and this had resulted in the timely prevention of more misuse of tokens in the one case where suspected misuse was substantiated. At the beginning of each year, the libraries purchase a large number of prepaid tokens. She praised Wiley’s cooperation in negotiating the price arrangement for the library. Since the library started using PPV, users (the library never made an announcement; most users do not know that Wiley is PPV,) were able to access a larger scope of contents and could quickly download articles of high quality. The previous usage reports showed that more than 55 journals were used heavily, while the majority of other Wiley titles were not. The widely spread small number of downloads from large number of titles validated the library’s decision to use PPV instead of conventional package subscriptions. (Rothbaum, E., Email, March, 2011. Personal Communication, March, 2011 & April, 2012).

Hamilton College has about 2000 undergraduates in liberal arts programs. In 2009, the library unbundled its Wiley-Blackwell package and began to use PPV for all titles. In a telephone discussion with Ms. Barbara Swetman, the Acquisitions and Serials Librarian, I learned that unmediated access has been used from the beginning. There was a short note “Access is by token” placed next to all Wiley titles in their A-Z journal list. When library patrons started using tokens, a pop-up note warned them: “You are going to use a token purchased by the library for
retrieving this article.” This year, a different a short note appears: “Article will be available for your institute for 24 hours.” So far, the library is satisfied with the results: a 50% reduction in budget for Wiley materials; lower usage of ILL; and expanding usage of materials contained in all available Wiley publications. She praised the accessibility to backfiles, since this library does not own any Wiley backfiles at all. She said almost one third of the tokens recorded in past usage reports have been used for backfiles of Wiley titles. (Swetman, B., Email, May, 2011. Personal Communication, May, 2011 & April, 2012).

**Mediated Model of Using PPV – By User Name and Password or by ILL**

The successful unmediated access model fits the two above libraries, one special research library and a small sized one, but it may not be appropriate for every library. More libraries are using the mediated model of PPV for better budget control. The most commonly used mediated access types are either using existing ILL systems or issuing user ID and password for selected groups.

Trinity University, with 2,500 students and 245 faculty members, offers primarily undergraduate programs of liberal arts. (Chamberlain, 2008). It canceled all Elsevier subscriptions for 2007, and began to use PPV with $30 per article. They limited PPV to faculty members. Students used the reference desk to access Elsevier articles. The library set up usernames and passwords for each department. Faculty members were satisfied with this service, since the articles downloaded from Science Direct are of better quality than the photocopies from ILL system. Library usage statistics showed big savings for the budget since faculty were well informed about the cost of each article retrieved. But librarians noticed it might be inconvenient for faculty to remember usernames and passwords for the PPV account, since downloads using PPV were much less than the period when the library had Science Direct package subscriptions. Still the librarian found “the majority of the articles retrieved (76%) were from journals that Trinity Library did not subscribe to.” (Chamberlain, 2008).

St. Michael College, a small sized school with 2000 students, has been using PPV with Elsevier since 2009. Ms. Laura Crain, Associate Director for Collection Services, has been responsible for the e-articles purchased by PPV in her library since then. She said the use of tokens is restricted to faculty members, who are given a user ID and password to access Science Direct. As a restriction, the library only includes selected titles in its link resolver. When the school semester is over, the token usage is over. So far, there have been no complaints. The library has
limited accessibility for its undergraduates, who have to get permissions from the library staff. (Crain, L., Personal Communication, October, 2011 & April, 2012).

Clarkson University differs from other libraries in that it does not prepay for any publishers since it started using PPV nine year ago. Clarkson is a small research university with more than 3000 students in 50 academic programs. Its mediated model for the PPV uses the ILL account. The library posts on the college web page a detailed “Pay-Per-View Policies and Procedures.” The whole process is monitored by its ILL staff, and serves only faculty. Online materials to be purchased are unrestricted, but the cost of each article should be no more than $50. The library has PPV with Nature Publishing Group, Science Direct, and Wiley, etc. If a student wants to participate in this service, permission from the faculty will be requested. The services mainly are available during the library working hours. My telephone discussion with Ms. Barbara Osgood, who is in charge of daily functions of PPV, confirms that she does not think it too burdensome for ILL staff, having herself managed this PPV model for 9 years. (Osgood, B., Personal Communication, May, 2012).

**Current Policy and Offerings of PPV from the publishers**

Most libraries which are using or used PPV are glad to see the possibilities of working with more publishers to provide higher level services within the library limited budget. However, some publishers view the unbundling of “big deal” and the substitution of PPV as having negatively impact on their revenue. Although they are providing PPV access for self-paying individual users, they are reluctant to support libraries in providing PPV as an alternative subscription. Fortunately, some journal providers have noticed the change of researchers’ interests, from journal titles to individual articles, and have begun to publish articles instead of journals, such as Sage Open. Increasingly, e-resources providers are offering more flexible pricing arrangements to academic libraries. At the same time, they are prolonging the ownership period for PPV articles. Librarians are really encouraged by these changes.

Sage Publishing Company started Sage Open when the importance of articles as basic research units was a hot topic among librarians. Though Sage Open deals with open access issues by securing payment from authors rather than readers, the giving up of journal titles by publishing articles only is a bold experiment. Sage Open publishes peer reviewed online articles in various subject areas. The collection of articles differs from regular
databases in that each article does not belong to any particular journal. The user is made aware that bibliographical citations for these articles have no journal titles, volume and issue numbers, or page numbers. Instead, its DOI number is the important reference for each article. The significance of Sage Open, might just be that it heralds the imminent death of journals as the medium for articles in our digital age. Time will tell.

Though Sage sensed the fundamental change of the researchers’ interest in articles rather than journals, so far it is not an enthusiastic provider of PPV for libraries. Currently, the most engaged is Wiley-Blackwell. Libraries welcome its flexible purchasing policy and negotiable price arrangement. Wiley’s policy encourages libraries to prepay for large number of tokens as a yearly subscription. In order to take advantage of Wiley’s offer, (a library can purchase either 100 tokens for $33.25 each or 1,500 tokens for $12.25 each), librarians have to estimate the quantity of their library’s requests for a certain period of time. Otherwise, at the end of the year, unused tokens will become invalid. But Wiley allows the continuing purchase of more tokens at any time. With this publisher’s flexible policy, most libraries using PPV started with Wiley.

For PPV, one of the critical elements is pricing. Cambridge University Press announced a rental program for articles from its more than 280 peer-reviewed journals. For just $5.99, users are able to read single articles online for up to 24 hours, a saving of up to 86% compared with the cost of PPV. Readers cannot download, print, or copy and paste the rented articles. (Howard, 2011). Renting articles is not Cambridge’s creative idea. DeepDyve, an e-resources provider, has already offered 24 hour, no-download access to research articles for several years. Nature Publishing Group (NPG) started, via the DeepDyve platform, trialing a range of access options for readers, many available for 24-hour-view-only access. (Baynes, 2012). The rental option, rather than the purchasing of online articles, eases the fear that readers pay for something they do not see ahead of time. Otherwise, as one chemist from Trinity University might say regarding his library’s PPV: “my Scotch soul feels funny spending $30 dollars when I don’t know what I am getting” (Chamberlain, 2008).

The length of ownership of PPV articles is another issue of concern to librarians. We are happy to see some publishers provide various time options nowadays. RCS Publishing’s policy allows the Pay-Per-View articles to be accessible for 7 days, not just 24 hours.

Ideal Support of PPV from the publishers to Libraries
Fisher (2012) pointed out that “Among current displays of PPV services for patrons, there is little to no customization available to library staff, so the library must accept the providers wording” and adjust to their systems as regarding any kinds of control. To put PPV into practice widely, we need the publishers and journal providers to improve their policy of PPV to better support libraries.

At the present time, small/middle sized libraries like to use the mediated model and hope that a publisher’s system has the capability of designating a librarian/staff as the superuser, in order to control the budget and to retrieve needed articles for patrons. Ideally, the superuser will get the email request (not through ILL) directly from the patron and the article will be emailed back as soon as possible. In this way, all faculty members, graduates and undergraduates can access needed articles. And the library can provide, even by this mediated model, almost seamless access to materials.

We also hope that publishers will cooperate with libraries in situations where the misuse/abuse of PPV is detected, and they will be able to quickly block access at the library’s request.

Of course, no matter what model a library chooses, the publisher’s flexible pricing policy for prepaying tokens or making a deposit account are crucial. Per our conversations with the librarians, all welcomed Wiley’s policy for prepaid tokens in different pricing arrangements. Cambridge UP’s policy, offering choices of renting or purchasing articles with different prices, should encourage more use of PPV. It is because of the serials crisis, “that libraries are unable to keep up with the constant increase in subscriptions prices” as Ponder told the e-resources providers in his Interview with BioOne’s Mark Kurtz in 2011. (Ponder, 2011). Libraries turning to the PPV or “little deal” are really looking for affordable pricing.

**Conclusion**

Detractors unhappily anticipated that “wholesale shifts to business models based on single article delivery would probably lead publishers to raise per article costs to fairly high levels to compensate for a loss of subscription revenue, but the option of PPV access to content is here to stay.” (Bosch, 2012). Librarians still hope that publishers should reconsider the negative attitudes and appreciate the necessity for and the advantages to libraries using the
PPV model for their products. PPV, as an alternative to journal subscriptions, is used by more and more libraries. Librarians are closely monitoring this development and would welcome any improvements from publishers.

Biography of the Author

Tian Xiao Zhang received her master’s degree in English Literature from Fordham University in 1987, after being awarded a bachelor’s degree from Hunan Normal University in China. She then continued her education at St. John’s University, and was awarded a master’s degree in library science in 1991. Prof. Zhang has worked as a professional librarian since 1991, beginning her career as a corporate librarian at Hoffman-La Roche before becoming a member of the faculty of St. John’s University Libraries in 1994. She was a reference librarian for several years and is currently in charge of the Serials and General Periodicals Departments of the University Libraries, where her goal is to establish a strong serials collection for all campuses, with an emphasis on electronic resources.

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