**A Report on the Charleston Pre-Conference “Weighing the Evidence: Evaluating Major Research Databases.”**

The licensing of e-book and e-journal databases dominates library world discussions today. This year’s CRL preconference at Charleston trained the attention of a number of collection development and licensing experts on a different question: how libraries and consortia evaluate major research databases in the humanities and social sciences for acquisition. Research libraries invest millions each year on purchasing and subscribing to large digital collections of news, law, and government publications and records; and primary opinion, financial, and historical data. The goal of the CRL pre-conference was to illuminate current practice and to ascertain what can be done to support decision-making on these investments.

Presenters at the pre-conference were: Tony Horava, Associate University Librarian (Collections), University of Ottawa Library, and CRKN (Canadian Research Knowledge Network) Negotiations Resource Team member; George Machovec, Associate Director of the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries, and Managing Editor of *The Charleston Advisor;* James R. Mouw, Associate Director, Technical & Electronic Services at the University of Chicago, and Editor-in-Chief, *Library Collections, Acquisitions, & Technical Services*; and Ann Okerson, Senior Advisor on Electronic Strategies at the Center for Research Libraries.

Attendees included collection development people from over fifty research and academic libraries and several consortia, and representatives of several academic publishers. PowerPoint presentations from the preconference are available on the CRL website at: <http://www.crl.edu/events/7320>.

The presentations and discussion at the preconference revealed a number of important points about how these decisions are currently made:

1. There is no single, uniform approach to database evaluations. “Best guesses” about local user needs and potential user uptake are the norm.
2. The interests of faculty members and other key users are the primary drivers of decisions, and will at times outweigh other considerations such as the presence of technical flaws and other weaknesses in a database.
3. Also important are: price (subscription or purchase price), annual access fees, user rights and other license terms, vendor reputation, quality of the interface, timing of the vendor’s offer (e.g., in relation to the availability of end-of-year money)
4. There are also complex metrics like the set of criteria outlined by presenter Tony Horava, based on his work on the CRKN Negotiations Resource Team, which apply “intellectual,” “structural support,” and “business case” considerations to evaluation of a product.
5. Often different factors can come into play for subject specialists and selectors, individual institutions, and consortia. Decisions have to be made at three different levels.
6. In some cases commercial databases have content that is also available in open access databases, such as Open Library, Google Books, Chronicling America, HathiTrust Digital Library, and others. But definitive comparisons are difficult to perform, and selectors do not always have the time or the necessary data to perform full comparisons.
7. Opinions vary about the usefulness of database trials. These are most useful when a product is released by a new publisher or by a known publisher on a new platform. It is often difficult to get results or findings within the time span allowed by publishers (which is usually 30 days and often at the wrong time of year).
8. Reports from internal reviews of individual databases are produced but are not normally shared, for a number of reasons. Findings of such reviews are often reported with the intention of internal use only, or are considered to be relevant only locally. The findings of a review undertaken for one library or consortium might not be relevant to another.
9. Apart from usage statistics there are few metrics to evaluate ROI on a database. Because such databases are often purchased outright, rather than subscribed to, there is little incentive for evaluations after the fact. Moreover, most major databases are “sole source” so there are few comparables.

It was clear from the presentations and the discussion that followed that those making these investment decisions would benefit from more information in certain areas:

1. Pricing: It is not always evident what the “list price” of a database is and how that price was arrived at. Even less clear is the discount schedule for a particular database. This information may be hard to obtain, and even more difficult to interpret. In some instances disclosure of this information may not be to a library’s advantage, or may be prohibited by non-disclosure agreements.
2. Pricing strategies and rationales: Consortium people know this territory well, but can this knowledge be more widely shared with libraries? With selectors?
3. The publishers’ pipeline: What is in development, not just what is currently in the pipeline but also when it and future databases are coming? Publishers may be reluctant, unable to divulge this, either for competitive reasons or because permissions/access negotiations are late in coming.
4. Database content: As open access sources such as Google Books and Chronicling America become more common, and more news and government information become available online, it would be useful to determine how much content in a given proprietary database is duplicated on the open Web. Detailed information about the overlap in content between particular commercial databases and microform or print collections might also be helpful.
5. Database impact: Data and other evidence of “return on investment” in particular databases might be collected and shared widely. These could include anecdotal and narrative reports, such as prizes (Nobel, National Book Award), and the publication of “big books” produced using databases.

The session presentations and discussion suggested that a number of things might be done to make investment in major research databases more informed and effective. Foremost among those things is a greater sharing of expertise, knowledge, and opinions among libraries and consortia on the contents, functionalities, costs and other terms of acquisition, and uses of these databases. CRL has long facilitated this kind of sharing in connection with building shared print and microform collections in certain key areas. Today analogous support should be provided around the licensing of primary electronic materials for research, particularly those that support international studies.

CRL can fill some of this need. It would be appropriate for CRL to support the licensing of two types of electronic resources: large humanities and social sciences databases and datasets; and smaller, specialized or “niche” digital collections, in particular international and foreign language materials. To this end CRL will take some first steps, beginning in early 2012:

1. Gap analysis: Working with a small number of partner consortia, CRL will survey collection development and electronic resources librarians to identify the methods, tools, and metrics currently employed by libraries and consortia in acquisition decision-making and post-licensing assessments. This survey will also explore the usefulness of cooperative trials of major databases.
2. Database assessments: CRL will continue to scale up its capabilities for analysis and evaluation of major primary databases in key areas of research interest and will provide venues for the sharing of information/intelligence needed to support planning and the prudent management of library and consortium resources.
3. Comparative analyses: CRL will undertake comparative analyses of open access and commercially available digital collections in its key areas, and will assess the value of such activities for additional subject areas. These key areas include news, law and government information, agriculture, and the history of science, with particular emphasis on foreign and foreign language materials.
4. Pipeline intelligence: CRL will actively endeavor to make the pricing and "pipeline" activities of selected database providers better understood and transparent, through appropriate dealings with those organizations. This activity will focus on electronic resources in the aforementioned key areas.

In general, the preconference was a stimulating and informative experience for all involved. The presentations and discussions also helped bring into focus some ways in which CRL can support effective, strategic development of collections in the digital arena. CRL will report on its progress in this area in future issues of *The Charleston Advisor* and at future Charleston conferences.