Improving Access to and Delivery of Academic Content from Libraries

A Roundup

Introduction

In the prior five chapters, we have gone through a whirlwind of tools, protocols, and standards related to authentication and authorization, including IP recognition, SAML-based methods, access broker browser extensions, SeamlessAccess, GetFTR, and Campus Activated Subscriber Access (CASA).

As many of these developments are still new, academic libraries will need to be on their toes to keep abreast of these coming changes. In this concluding chapter, I will provide some practical advice on how to do so.

Some Practical Steps: Taking the Bird's-Eye View

How and what your institution should support is very much a function of your user community's interests, context, and resources.

You might already be supporting some of these delivery methods: for example, promoting the use of an access broker browser extension or having varying degrees of support for SAML federated access. While it may be tempting to work on each of these developments separately—for example, forming a project team to evaluate and select a suitable access broker browser extension or forming yet another project team to study implementation and support of SeamlessAccess and GetFTR—this can lead to piecemeal efforts that fail to see the whole picture.

Instead, I suggest that a better approach (particularly if it has never been done before) is to form a cross-functional team of library staff members across various departments (liaison librarians, library IT, and electronic resource librarians) to conduct an audit to see where the library stands in terms of support for each of the methods covered in the earlier chapters.

It is also important to bring in the voice of the customer whenever possible, and faculty, students, campus IT, and other stakeholders should be brought in when necessary to ensure a complete picture. Some questions to consider for this task force:

- Do our users consider delivery a big issue? What situations or scenarios are the biggest pain points?
- What options to improve delivery are currently available for our users, and how aware are users of these options?
- What do our stakeholders, both librarians and users, think about the tradeoff between convenience and risk of loss of privacy?
- Do we have the in-house technical expertise to evaluate the issues (e.g., privacy risks of SeamlessAccess, GetFTR, and access broker browser extensions)? If not, how should we build expertise?

Some Long-Term Scenarios

Currently, developments in this area of librarianship are still in flux, and there are many uncertainties about how things will turn out. Nobody has a crystal ball; however, it might be instructive to consider the following three scenarios to trigger discussion for your planning. These scenarios attempt to forecast a

future in 2027 to 2032, five to ten years after the publication of this report.

Scenario One: SeamlessAccess and GetFTR Become Widely Adopted

In this scenario, the publisher-backed SeamlessAccess and GetFTR have become widely supported by most journal publishers and platforms alike. IP authentication for library resources has become a rarity as institutions and content owners are mostly supporting SAML federated access. Most users have long become customized to clicking on the "Log in via Your Institution" button to benefit from SeamlessAccess, and when they encounter the rare resource that requires IP authentication and proxies, they are extremely dissatisfied.

While privacy leaks via SAML entity attributes still occasionally occur, standards have been put in place, and most institutions are careful enough to avoid such issues. Meanwhile, GetFTR has finally solved the technical and coordination issues of getting aggregators on board as content providers, and major aggregators such as EBSCO and ProQuest are now supported. As a result, most scholarly platforms now support GetFTR. Platforms that do not have the technical capability to implement GetFTR opt for supporting LibKey linking or Google CASA, while the most sophisticated platforms, such as Semantic Scholar, support both.

While use of library link resolvers has declined somewhat, they continue to still be used because GetFTR supports only DOI resolvable content, and in any case Google Scholar has stubbornly refused to support GetFTR. Access broker browser extensions have declined in popularity due to the combined effects of SeamlessAccess and GetFTR reducing the need for such extensions. Some of these browser extensions instead pivoted to support discovery and recommendations and helped to bring librarians into the user's workflow.

This is an optimistic scenario for the future, of course.

Scenario Two: A Hybrid Future

This is the status quo scenario. While SeamlessAccess and GetFTR continued to make strides in development, they ultimately did not become a complete universal solution.

In the case of SeamlessAccess, there were a couple of barriers. First, while major publishers were capable of making the technical investment to support SeamlessAccess and the underlying federated access method, this still left out hundreds of smaller publishers and content owners that did not have the capability. Similarly, while many institutions were capable of supporting federated access methods, with libraries either running their own IdPs via OpenAthens or relying on campus IT, many institutions were not. Some chose not to, due to privacy concerns. As a result, most publishers still maintain support for IP authentication and proxies, and ultimately SeamlessAccess did not achieve its aim of displacing IP authentication. Similarly, GetFTR, while it is commonly seen on many platforms such as Mendeley and Scopus, ultimately cannot be a complete solution as it has not managed to solve the technical issues regarding supporting aggregators. As a result, access broker browser extensions remain popular, and users live in a fragmented ecosystem where SeamlessAccess and GetFTR are just two of many options.

This scenario seems to me personally to be the most likely future with the landscape of access management becoming a hybrid one.

Scenario Three: Open Access Triumphant

In this scenario, developments in scholarly communications have led to the much-anticipated open-access world. Whether it is Plan S or Subscribe to Open (S2O)[1] or some other business model, someone finally cracked the code, and most journal content (say, more than 90 percent) is born open access for version of record.

As noted in the last section of chapter 1, this does not totally remove the need for authentication and authorization, as many licensed library resources—such as abstracting and indexing, financial, and other non-open-access databases—continue to require access management. Still, in this future, we see a decline in the importance of such technologies, even though publishers try to encourage single sign-ons via SeamlessAccess even when a user is accessing open-access content.

While I believe we certainly will have made substantial progress in open access by 2032, it seems unlikely to me that the vast majority of new publications will be automatically open access. In my personal opinion, this is the least likely of the three scenarios. Of course, if this scenario does come to pass, I believe it will result in a substantial rethink of academic librarianship beyond the impact on access management of resources.

Other Scenarios

These are just three straightforward projections of the future of libraries in delivery, and other scenarios exist. As they say, the best way to predict the future is to make it, so hopefully this exercise in scenario planning will allow you to not just plan for your institution but also advocate for the future together with others.

Resources to Keep Abreast of Developments

- GetFTR official website—https://www.getfulltext research.com
- SeamlessAccess official website—https://seamless access.org
- Comparison of access broker browser extensions (regularly updated)—http://musingsaboutlibrari anship.blogspot.com/2019/07/a-comparison-of -6-access-broker-browser.html

Conclusion

While providing access to needed resources may not be as exciting or glamorous as providing users support in discovery, information literacy instruction, and research support in digital scholarship, a core part of our library service is to provide users with access to the resources they need.

Even with the rise of open access, I believe providing more seamless and reliable access to resources remains one of the most critical tasks of libraries. I hope this report has given you food for thought on the various ways libraries can provide such support and some clarity on how this area might change in the coming years.

Note

1. For more information on these models, visit https://www.coalition-s.org and https://subscribetoopencom munity.org.