

Changing Online Hosting Platforms: Part I

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As the managing editor for a small, quarterly, scholarly journal I am a one-woman shop—the chief cook and bottle washer, which can keep me very busy but has also allowed me to learn much about the ever-changing world of scholarly publishing. As I was preparing to interview for my current position with a small nonprofit association, I did the requisite research one does when looking for a new position, including perusing the journal's website. The site consisted of the journal's current published content in addition to several years of back content. My first thought when I saw the site was, 'I want to change that site!' Although the site was functional enough, it had a very outdated look to it.

My chance came when after taking on my current position, the publisher of our journal proposed we change the journal's online hosting provider, that is, the vendor who is responsible for maintaining and posting the online version of the journal on the Internet using the vendor's proprietary online hosting platform. I was excited at the thought of doing so, with a hefty dose of intimidation and uncertainty thrown in since I had no experience in doing something like this. Where does one start in evaluating why and how to change online hosting platforms? Following are the steps I took, with help from the journal's editor-in-chief and our publisher, in making the transition of online platforms. Please keep in mind this is how we made our decision, but it should not be construed as the only method for deciding to change vendors.

I have written this article in two installments: Part I covers why and how we decided to change online hosting platforms, and Part II will cover how we prepared for the transition of the site, the process of transitioning the site, and the outcome of doing so.

Why Change Online Hosting Platforms?

Several factors drove the decision to consider moving our journal to a different online hosting provider. Because our contract was ending, the time was opportune to explore other options and platforms for hosting our journal online while at the same time considering renegotiation of our current contract. Our publisher uses a different platform from what we were using, which created some difficulty in terms of production. Because file requirements were different between the two platforms, our journal was the odd man out, requiring more production and staff time to provide files in the format required by our vendor. In addition, we had two concerns about the current vendor. The first was we had heard from colleagues that our current vendor's services came at a higher cost than other providers; however, we needed to conduct more research to determine if this was the case. The second was the vendor's customer service was sometimes lacking, with slow response to my requests and to requests from our publisher to resolve problems with the site.

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How We Made the Decision to Change

To begin the process of changing online vendors, I compared services and costs among three different vendors, followed by writing a proposal for changing vendors to present to the people within the association who would be responsible for making the final decision to make a change.

Obtaining an estimate

To get started on evaluating whether to make the transition to another provider, I began by comparing our current vendor (Vendor A) with two other vendors: the vendor used by our publisher (Vendor B) and a third vendor (Vendor C) who was not involved with the journal in any way. (I have intentionally left out the proper name of each vendor so as not to promote one vendor over another.) I requested a formal estimate from Vendor C and relied on our publisher to provide me with the same information for Vendor B. (If we switched to Vendor B, it was determined that our publisher would contract directly with them.) In seeking the estimate from Vendor C, I chose an online hosting vendor who appeared to have similar capabilities to the platforms of Vendors A and B. I contacted a sales person I had met at a professional meeting and requested an estimate for the cost of transitioning the journal, including back content, and the cost of the services overall for maintaining the site from month to month and the posting of each new issue quarterly. I also asked whether Vendor C would be willing to work with a small journal. In my request, I included a description of our association (e.g., type of membership association, location of members, etc.) and a brief description of the journal (i.e., page count per issue, frequency of publication, and print run), a list of the

features available on our current site (e.g., articles available as PDFs and in HTML; electronic table of contents notifications; back-digitized articles since 2003, with some sporadic tables of contents available prior to 2003; deposition to applicable indexes, etc.), a list of vendors responsible for other aspects of publishing the journal (including the publisher, who is responsible for copyediting, composition, printing, fulfillment, and distribution), and the name of the vendor of our online peer-review submission system.

Comparing services

As I evaluated the three platforms, I found there were very few differences among platforms, with all three vendors providing similar, if not the same, features and functionality. These common features included the following:

- All three platforms were well-recognized, high-performing platforms, with each platform hosting journals published by large, commercial publishers as well as non-profit associations and learned societies
- Articles could be posted in PDF and HTML formats (providing articles in HTML increased cost on all three platforms)
- XML metadata were deposited in online scholarly linking, abstracting, and indexing databases (e.g., CrossRef, PubMed, SCOPUS, and Google Scholar)
- Each platform partnered with major online search engines (e.g., Google, MSN, Yahoo)
- All three platforms had similar browse

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- and search interfaces, allowing users to choose between simple and advanced search options, including fielded searches of article titles, author names, abstracts and keywords, as well as the ability to search with Boolean operators
- Each platform had similar registrations procedures for users, with maintenance of institutional and individual IP addresses
 - Comparable reports collected usage data across content by title (articles accessed) and institution (IP address access)
 - Each had a single-article purchasing option (also known as *pay per view* [PPV])
 - Each had the ability to post supplemental data/material
 - E-mail notifications could be sent to subscribers when a new issue of the journal was posted online
 - Each had forward and backward reference linking
 - Each had the ability to design a new journal site, closely matching the design and/or look and feel of the recently re-designed print journal and aligning the look of the site with the association's new website

Because the similarities were so great, I decided the best way to evaluate and differentiate the three platforms was to consider the pro and cons for each vendor that lay outside the realm of the similarities listed above. Following is the list of the pros and cons for each:

Vendor A

Pros

- Had the biggest 'brand name'
- Journal had been established with this vendor since 2006
- No file transfer costs

Cons

- Highest annual cost of the three vendors
- Complexity of file formats needed for providing files for posting

Vendor B

Pros

- Significantly lower annual cost than Vendor A, but comparable to Vendor C
- Publisher would serve as liaison for transition of sites and continued posting of files
- There might be additional leverage to negotiate costs because of publisher's relationship with Vendor B
- File requirements for articles to be posted online were less cumbersome/complex than as requested by Vendor A
- Each of the publisher's online journals were hosted on Vendor B; therefore, adding our journal to this list would result in increased efficiency and consistency in production of the journal

Cons

- One-time cost for file transfer and design of site

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- Lack of familiarity with the vendor; therefore, we were giving up some control by relying on our publisher to present Vendor B's platform to us

Vendor C

Pros

- Significantly lower annual cost than Vendor A and only slightly higher than Vendor B

Cons

- There were significant one-time costs for moving to this vendor that were not required for the other two vendors
- No previous experience or relationship with this vendor by either the association or the publisher
- File requirements for posting online and other operational details were unknown
- A more thorough review of Vendor C would be needed, including who would be responsible for transitioning sites (publisher vs. managing editor) and for preparing files for posting (publisher vs. managing editor), and how would subscriptions be affected?

Comparing Costs

After comparing the features and services of each platform I completed a comparison of costs across the three vendors for transitioning and maintaining the journal's site. I broke down each vendor's costs for transitioning the journal's site into the following categories:

- Initial cost for setting up the new site,
- Additional cost for design of the new site if not included in the set-up cost,
- The cost of converting back content,
- The cost of providing a PPV option,
- The cost for posting supplemental data,
- The cost for providing free access,
- The total cost to transition the site, and
- The yearly cost of maintaining the site, including the cost for posting each new issue of the journal.

Obviously, we already knew what the costs for each category were for Vendor A; however, for Vendors B and C, each vendor provided their estimates with slightly different cost variables. For example, Vendor B provided an estimate for setting up the new site in addition to a cost for designing the site; whereas, Vendor C's cost for designing the site was included in the estimate for setting up the site. Vendor B did not charge for back content conversion whereas Vendor C did. Vendor C charged separately for setting up the service to post supplemental data whereas Vendor B did not. To avoid confusion I used a table to simplify and present visually the estimates from each vendor (See Table 1).

The Decision

Ultimately, we decided to leave Vendor A and transition our site to Vendor B, the hosting platform used by our publisher. For us, the biggest consideration came down to cost for yearly maintenance of the site and posting of each new issue of the journal. Although we would initially incur the added cost of setting up the new site, once the site was established we'd be paying about half of what we were paying previously. The yearly costs for maintaining the site were about equal between

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Table 1. Vendor Comparison

Vendor	Initial costs to set up new site	Design of new site	Back content conversion	PPV	Supplemental data	Free access	Total cost to transition site	Yearly cost
Vendor A								
Vendor B								
Vendor C								

Vendors B and C; however, we felt production would be streamlined if we were using the same vendor that our publisher used for their other online journals. In addition, our publisher was already familiar with Vendor B.

Buy-in

Because the journal I work on is relatively autonomous from the association, the only approval needed for making the decision to change platforms was approval of the preliminary proposal by the editor-in-chief of the journal, with final approval needed from the association's executive director. I used the

information presented from the above sections to structure the proposal for presentation to our executive director, who ultimately approved the decision to change online hosting vendors.

PART II

In Part II of this article, I will discuss how we planned for the actual transition of our journal's site once we made the decision to change platforms, how the transition went, and the lessons learned in the process.



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