The Work of the Serials Librarian

This brief introduction reflects the growing predominance of electronic journals in the role and daily activity of the serials librarian, whose remit has frequently grown to include all electronic resources, including databases and in some cases electronic books, etc. However, for most, print has not yet disappeared, and the journal itself shows signs of rude health, even if the system of scholarly communication may well be on the verge of revolutionary change. Continuing changes have had, and will have, profound implications for the role of the serials librarian. Nevertheless, most of the attributes appropriate for this responsibility listed in previous versions of this document remain very relevant in the world of the electronic journal. Core skills and experience required today might include:

- Negotiating skills
- Financial and accounting skills, including setting and monitoring budgets
- Skills in interpreting licence agreements
- Knowledge of appropriate spreadsheet, database, etc. packages
- An awareness of technical developments with the internet, viewing software, access control, etc.
- Close attention to detail
- An ability to track down the sources of problems and troubleshoot them, particularly when it comes to electronic journals
- A knowledge of developments in scholarly communication and the serials world – the advent of open-access journals, and the growth in the number of researchers 'self-archiving' their articles in institutional or other online repositories, is likely to have a profound influence on the position of the serials librarian.

Standard management qualities, such as interpersonal, communication, problem-solving and leadership skills, are also required.

The definition of a serial has not changed significantly over the years. The second edition 1998 revision of the *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR2)* defines a serial as 'a publication in any medium issued in successive parts bearing numeric or chronological designations and intended to be continued indefinitely'. This definition includes online (although continuous updating is a feature of some e-journals, as opposed to publication 'in successive parts'), print, microform, and CD-ROM journals, and, for example, newspapers and popular magazines as well as academic journals, although most serials librarians will spend most of their time on the latter category, whether they work in academic, national, government, health or workplace libraries.

Academic and research journals originated in the seventeenth century as a means of exchanging information among a pool of scholars. They have grown and diversified, particularly in the last fifty years, and there are now around 80,000 current titles. However, the functions of the academic journal remain the same:

- To disseminate information on the latest advances in a subject field
- To certify the standard and reliability of new research, by means of peer review
- To form the ever-growing archive of scientific progress on which future generations can build.

Selection of journals

A logical first step in the process of obtaining serials information for the library is to select which journals will be acquired. In practice, most staff will take over an already functioning collection, but orders for new titles, and cancellation of existing subscriptions, will still be an important activity in all but the most static of situations, with full-scale regular reviews being undertaken in a growing number of information services.

Selection of journals has become rather more complicated in recent years with the introduction of 'big deals' for 'bundles' of journals from individual publishers. Typically, these deals give electronic access to all, or a large proportion of, journals from an individual (often large) publisher, for a price somewhat greater than an individual library is paying at present. The increased access has to be balanced against the increased cost combined with restrictions on cancellations which tend to reduce flexibility, and can have the effect of endangering subscriptions to journals from smaller publishers. It is not yet clear whether 'big deals' will become a permanent part of the selection and negotiating landscape, or whether they are a transitory phenomenon.

A further complication is the fairly recent introduction of payments for online backfiles for serials, which may vary from deep backfiles, in some cases going back 50 or more years, to more recent backfiles of 5-10 years before the current issue. Libraries may wish to invest in these resources for various reasons: to free up space for other uses as they gradually shift from print to electronic serials collections, to enhance collections in specific subject areas as their institutional mission changes over the years, or to enhance their services to those users who rarely visit the Library building and prefer to conduct their researches in the online environment. However, in many cases, the serials librarian will now face a bewildering array of different options for subscription or one-off payment.

Responsibility for selection and cancellation may be given to a combination of any of the following:
- Serials librarian
- Subject/liaison librarian
- Library management team
- Chief librarian
- Departmental or faculty committees (of users)
- Heads of (user) departments
- Library committee
- Institution governing body.

Criteria that may be taken into account include:
- Requirement for research
- Requirement for teaching
- Usage levels of existing subscriptions
- Availability elsewhere
- Quality of journal, measured by, for example, its 'impact factor', calculating the frequency of journal article citations
- Subscription price of journal, and/or inclusion within 'bundle'
- Licence and access conditions
- Strategic decisions to move away from print subscriptions towards online ones.

In many libraries there is now a very close relationship between journals acquired by subscription, and those where articles are received by Inter-Library Loan (ILL) or document delivery, electronic or otherwise. ILL statistics may reveal that articles from certain journals are requested often enough in relation to that journal's subscription price to justify subscribing. Conversely, if usage, however measured, of existing subscriptions seems insufficient, document delivery may be the more economic option. To facilitate such comparisons, the 'serials' and 'document delivery' functions may come within the same library department, bringing together alternative methods of providing access to the same journal literature.

Budgeting and financial control

The setting of the annual serials budget, and its division, may be important tasks for the serials librarian although, as with selection and cancellation, this may also take place at a broader level. Both processes will involve negotiation. The overall serials budget will be determined by some or all of the following:
- The financial health of the institution
- The overall library budget
- Funding required to maintain existing subscriptions
- User needs and requests.

Division of the budget may be determined by:
- 'Historical shares' of different departments or faculties
- Negotiations between interested parties
- A formula, simple or complex.

And a formula may take into account, for example:
- Usage rates – these can, in principle at least, be measured more accurately for e-journals: as more publishers and intermediaries conform to COUNTER standards (www.projectcounter.org), comparability of usage statistics is improving steadily
- Changes in numbers of user staff or students
- Differential subscriptions, and number of titles, in various subject areas
- New or declining research projects or courses
- Research Assessment Exercise gradings (in UK universities), or similar measures of quality
- Differential inflation rates.

If the overall serials budget is insufficient, as is often the case, then cancellations (or transfers from other budgets) will be required. It is not uncommon for committees to have the authority to move funds between monograph, serials, and document delivery budgets, and the serials librarian, and other staff, must be able to provide figures to inform such movements.

For many years, serials inflation has outpaced both general price rises and the general rise in library budgets in most, if not all, sectors. The serials librarian can obtain figures from subscription agents of inflation in different subject areas, for past years, and estimates for the coming year, vital for budget calculation. An additional complication for many libraries is that a high proportion (two thirds or more by value in some cases) of journals are published outside the UK, and therefore fluctuations in exchange rates can sometimes play havoc with budget predictions. For universities and others, a further consideration is the imposition of VAT: print serials are currently zero-rated, but online information attracts VAT at the standard 15% rate, inhibiting the transfer from print to e-journals.

Budget monitoring throughout the financial year is also essential, as budgets almost always have to be set before the actual costs of journal subscriptions for the following year are known. The serials industry is unusual, if not unique, in that commitment to purchase is customarily made in advance of full pricing knowledge, and certainly before delivery. This emphasises the importance of the difficult art of prediction, and means that possible shortfalls, or surpluses, may have to be transferred from, or to, other more flexible library expenditure headings, such as monograph purchases.

Subscription management

Serials are very expensive and the serials librarian has a duty to manage access and acquisition as efficiently as possible. In most circumstances, placing orders through a subscription agent remains the most effective route to follow, given the multiplicity of publishers issuing serial titles. A companion sheet gives more information on the role and work of the agent. The choice of an agent is a vital decision for a serials librarian, and should be based on service issues, as well as discounts or fees charged. Library consortia now play an important part in selecting agents, and the serials librarian should be ready to participate fully in activities such as compiling Request for Proposal documents, evaluating tenders submitted by agents, and selecting the appropriate supplier(s) according to objective criteria. A library may be a member of more than one consortium, for example in the UK higher education sector taking advantage of e-journal offers available via JISC's NESLi2 negotiations (www.nesli2.ac.uk) or via Eduserv Chest (www.eduserv.org.uk/chest/).

Print journals
The day-to-day management of print journals still affects most serials librarians, and can be a time-consuming business. Particular concerns include:
- Claims for missing or skipped issues, a perennial problem with titles supplied direct from the publisher, although one that can be alleviated by use of an agent's consolidation service, with issues shipped via the agent
- Keeping track of title changes and publication pattern changes
- Stock management, a broad topic that covers, for example, decisions on binding and other forms of preservation, and decisions on relegation to storage, or discard, of titles
- Display, e.g. should current serial issues be placed on separate shelving?
- Circulation, e.g. should serials be loanable or reference only? What security tagging or other measures should be implemented to discourage vandalism and theft?

Electronic journals
E-journals, however, are now the primary interest for most library staff, offering a whole new set of opportunities and problems. They may be offered 'free' with an existing print subscription, or as separate online subscriptions, or as part of a 'bundle' of titles from individual publishers or from other intermediaries. They may be obtained from a growing variety of sources, including 'traditional' subscription agents, the publishers themselves, or a selection of database hosts. As with print titles, consortia, national or regional, can play a large part in the acquisition of electronic journal titles. The very concept of 'acquisition' may become outdated, as serials librarians become expert in negotiating access licences, direct with publishers or via intermediaries.

Other areas of importance include:
- Mounting electronic journals: is it best to link directly to the publisher's website, or to access via a hosting service operated by a subscription agent, a bibliographic database provider (links between current awareness services

and abstracting and indexing services and the full electronic text of journal articles have mushroomed in recent years), or an intermediary specialising in this activity?

- Authorisation and authentication: will access be controlled by IP addresses or by username/password, or by some combination? If IP addresses, what about caching issues, or access from off the home site? If by username/password, is a central system available, or will there be separate passwords for each service, very difficult to administer?
- Viewing and printing: are articles available in PDF or HTML format? Can they be downloaded and/or printed?
- Access problems: is re-registration required every year? How easy is it to maintain access that has been paid for?

Automated serials systems

Automated systems are now in use in most libraries, ranging from large integrated library management systems to those designed for the smaller library. Most systems now cater for serials control, and integration of serials data with other bibliographic, circulation and financial information can be very useful. For example, OPACs can link directly to e-journal web pages, or tell the user the latest issue of a particular title that has been checked in, and serial volumes can be barcoded for circulation. Some management systems now include a module to record, control and integrate the multifaceted aspects of licence data, linking licence, resource and title information. These systems generally come under the heading of Electronic Resource Management Systems (ERMS). It is also possible for some systems to receive serials invoices as data files from suppliers, which can save much time on data entry. A versatile management information system can be a great boon to a serials librarian, helping him or her to link together different aspects of financial information in particular.

Providing information to the user

Serials librarians may be responsible for cataloguing and classifying serial titles. They may have to master the complexities of serials bibliographic and holdings records, and decide whether serials should be classified, or simply shelved in an alphabetical sequence. There may also be a requirement to provide links to e-journal titles, either via separate listings or within the main catalogue. Previously many libraries listed their e-journals on individual web pages but, with so many titles to keep track of, this quickly became unworkable for larger libraries, and they began to look to intermediaries who could manage the links for them through centrally administered 'knowledgebases'. Serials librarians may need to get to grips with the day-to-day management of such systems, to ensure that they contain accurate information about local holdings. They may also utilise such systems, or use data provided directly by publishers, to import catalogue records and thus provide access direct from the MARC catalogue record to the electronic full text of the journal. A decision will have to be made on whether to have a single record for print and electronic holdings, or separate records for different formats. Records may have to be contributed to union catalogues such as SUNCAT, the UK Serials Union Catalogue (www.suncat.ac.uk), to help to open up holdings to those from outside the home institution. The introduction of OpenURL management systems, such as SFX and its equivalents, unlocked another opportunity for the serials librarian to become involved in organising and promoting access for library patrons to serial-type resources. Providing information to local library users about serials content that is openly available without subscription provides yet another challenge.

More generally, many serials librarians are now more closely in touch with library users than in the past, offering advice and help to those having difficulties with electronic access, and engaging in activities to market and raise the profile of the entire collection, both print and electronic. With electronic delivery becoming the norm, and library users increasingly finding material via generic search engines, serials librarians need to work to ensure that their users realise that the articles they read are paid for by the library and not free on the internet. Whatever the future holds, the higher profile role of serials staff is set to continue in the electronic age.

Stock management and preservation

With an increasing emphasis on online access amongst library users, and with back issues on paper therefore in much less demand, there is pressure to convert valuable library real estate for other uses. There may also be efforts to de-duplicate stock, where there are several libraries carrying backruns of the same print titles across a large institution, a regional consortium or nationally (for example as is happening with the UK Research Reserve project). Serials librarians may therefore be instrumental in recommending and organising stock for withdrawal and disposal, or storage at another location, according to various criteria.

Understandably, once libraries have invested heavily in electronic content and no longer have immediate access to print versions, there is a concern that this investment is independently protected and cannot be 'lost', either after cancellation of the current subscription, or through the disappearance of the title or publisher for whatever reason. Hence there are now a number of initiatives aiming to preserve e-journal archives, such as LOCKSS, CLOCKSS, Portico, British Library digital archives and so on, and Serials librarians may be called upon to assess the feasibility of signing up for one or more of these initiatives, or indeed participate in the running of them.

Conclusion

This summary of activities has concentrated on the current role of the serials librarian. The role has changed greatly in recent years, and will undoubtedly continue to change, although the core skills required may remain more stable. While a revised version of this document will frequently be necessary, the life of a serials librarian has been exciting and fascinating in recent years, and is certainly set to stay that way into the future.

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