

THE SELECTION, ORDERING, AND HANDLING OF SERIALS

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In agreeing to discuss the selection, ordering, and handling of serials up to the point of cataloging or other forms of processing for use, I accepted an assignment to talk about the category of publications which has formed and still constitutes the core of the Iowa State University Library's book collections, notably scientific and technical periodicals and other serials in the basic and applied fields of the physical and biological sciences.

Existing definitions of what constitutes a periodical as well as a serial are, in my opinion, so well known and generally accepted that they need not be repeated here. Such serials as government publications, including the large variety and volume of research and development reports, will not be mentioned specifically because other papers on the program for this Institute deal with them.

At Iowa State we have lived comfortably, and effectively, I believe, for over 40 years with an acquisitions program which has from the start strongly stressed the importance of serial publications, thanks to the early, energetic, and sustained efforts of my worthy predecessor, the late Charles Harvey Brown. In retrospect, however, it seems to me that our procedures for the selection, ordering, and handling of serials have changed little, if any, during the past four decades, except in the matter of staff organization, a subject which I shall touch upon shortly. Those of us who are concerned today with these procedures are cognizant of the trends of the times involving the use of computers or other automation equipment of various types and designs.

I elected to base this paper not upon the existing literature but upon the returns from a questionnaire which was mailed to 76 medium and large academic libraries. The libraries selected to receive this questionnaire were chosen from those listed in Groups I and II in "College and University Library Statistics, 1958/59."¹ All libraries recorded as receiving more than 2,400 periodicals were sent a copy of the questionnaire. The response to this mailing was, to me, friendly, cooperative, and overwhelming. As a matter of fact, 66 of the questionnaires out of a total of 76, or nearly 87 per cent, were filled out and returned in time for me to make use of their contents. Frankly, the

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preparation of this paper, based upon practices now being followed in the 66 libraries and at Iowa State, rather than upon theoretical matters, has provided a welcome and needed opportunity for serious review at home. Even a casual perusal of the returns reveals that procedures relating to the selection, ordering, and handling of serials are in many aspects so different and varied from one institution to another as to defy the identification of any discernible major present practice or of trends for the future.

Varying so much in nature and complexity, the reported procedures indicate to me the need for much experimentation and, moreover, that the attainment of the ideal in this important work must still be a long way off. Needless to say, however, the future will see the development and utilization of much automation equipment, whether it be IBM punched cards or tape, magnetic tape, or other devices. Clearly evident in the returns to the questionnaire is the ground swell of interest and activity on the part of librarians in the early adoption of automation equipment, notably in the area of fiscal controls.

The first of the four sections of the questionnaire relates to the organization of the serials staff. The three questions in this section constitute an attempt in each instance to ascertain whether or not the library has a separate serials department, how it functions, and whether or not the library administration is satisfied with its present serials organization. A tabulation of the returns reveals that 32 libraries have separate serials departments and that 34 have serials sections which are part of the acquisitions division or, in rare instances, of other units of the library. Of the 32 which have separate serials departments, 11 performed all of the functions of the selection, ordering, and handling of serials, while 21 did not. The variations of the 21 libraries which handled less than this scope of activity are so numerous that a full description of their practices is not possible within the limits of this paper.

The most common variance concerns the procedure involved in the selection of serials. This is a topic specifically covered in the second section of the questionnaire. Faculty members and administrative officers of the institutions concerned are commonly involved, and rightly so, in my opinion, in this activity. In a number of instances the serials department is also responsible for the cataloging of serials.

Of the 65 libraries responding to the question of whether or not they are satisfied with their present serials organization, 39 replied in the affirmative and 26 in the negative. Possibly it would be of interest to break these figures down according to form of organization. Replies from libraries which have separate serials departments indicated that two out of every three libraries are satisfied. Those without separate serials departments reported in this manner: 14 are satisfied, and 19 are not.

Of those reporting dissatisfaction, the reasons can be summarized as follows: trained librarians are needed to direct the serials program, separate serials departments are being planned, IBM systems or other automation programs of fiscal controls are needed, central serials records are needed, and changes are planned pending the availability of new physical facilities. According to the answers to the questionnaires, central serials records seem to mean several things, ranging from central serials checking files to central notation of serials holdings for public and library staff use. It is my judgment, in the light of the replies received, that the recording of serials receipts and holdings leaves much to be desired in terms of uniformity or, indeed, of the understanding of the needs of the people who use such records. I think that much study of this entire area of library operations is in order and that it should receive the attention of librarians who are informed of the importance of handling serials in the manner best calculated to serve the needs of all persons.

Personal experience and observation over many years lead me to believe that the staff organization of the serials department, whether as a separate unit or as a major part of an acquisitions unit, depends in large measure upon the personnel available for this work. At Iowa State University the work of ordering books or serials and the handling of the exchanges program has from time to time been organized in from one to three departments, depending largely upon the number and character of the personnel available. At present it is handled by two departments, one for serials and exchanges and another for books and back sets. Personally, I place little significance upon the particular type of organization for acquisitions in any given library. Much more important, in my opinion, is the library staff's understanding of the great importance of serial publications and its ability to achieve an efficient program of acquiring, processing, and making serials available for use.

Section 2 of the questionnaire deals with the selection of serials—an extremely important responsibility. Subscriptions to serials constitute a recurring and ever-higher financial commitment. Anyone in touch with this aspect of the acquisitions program must be aware of the frantic proliferation of serials and the steady upward trend in prices. All of us are aware of the action of a well known scientific society whose abstracting journal is being increased in price per copy from \$250 to \$500 annually. At present Iowa State subscribes to six copies of this particular abstracting service. Next year the number of subscriptions will be reduced to four, and they will cost us more than the six we now receive. In fairness to the society, however, I should say that its financial plight is real, and it seems to me that increases in the subscription rates to various categories of subscribers is the only means by which the publication of this indispensable service can be continued.

One of the facts ascertained by means of the questionnaire was that only four libraries reported having written statements of their acquisitions policies and that a fifth has one in preparation. By and large, criteria used in determining which serials should be bought or secured by gift or exchange involve an intimate knowledge by faculty and library staff members of the present and projected programs of instruction and investigation.

To a lesser extent, the inclusion of a serial in an indexing or an abstracting journal is considered. Also, cooperative programs, whether regional or those conducted by such agencies as the Farmington Plan or the Midwest Inter-Library Center, are influential in some instances in the determination of which serials libraries will add to their collections.

It was interesting to me to note that most of the responding libraries indicated that recommendations for serial subscriptions were accepted from members of the faculty and the student body and in some instances from other readers as well. As for procedures of approval, the majority of the 66 libraries replied that the library director or the assistant director, the acquisitions chief, or the serials head shouldered this responsibility. In several instances, notably where departmental allocations are in effect, the head of the academic department appeared to have this authority. Frankly, little or no dissatisfaction was expressed with this practice, but it seems to me that the sooner such cumbersome and sometimes troublesome methods of administering library funds are eliminated in favor of centrally administered library funds, the better off all concerned will be. Moreover, in my opinion, there is a greater likelihood then of achieving a more balanced development of the book collections as a whole when funds are centrally administered.

In the course of my participation in a few library surveys, several aspects of systems of departmental allocations came to light. In the first place, it appears to me to be difficult, if not impossible, to secure equal attention and cooperation in this effort from all academic departments. Some of them spend all of their allocations early and clamor for more funds, while others have to be prodded to utilize fully the funds made available to them. Secondly, it is not uncommon for departments to adopt a proprietary attitude toward the publications purchased from their respective allocations and, therefore, to resent the use of such publications by staff members in other departments. Actually, the librarian or a knowledgeable delegate of his organization, with the active assistance of his colleagues and the faculty, is in a much more advantageous position to exercise wise control over the development of the book collections for the whole institution. Also, the bookkeeping involved in administering and reporting departmental allocations is expensive and time consuming.

Of those replying to the question about an active weeding program, 47 libraries indicated that they did not have such a program. Of the 15 which answered in the affirmative, several qualified their replies by saying that the weeding of serials was limited to trial subscriptions.

It is the opinion of the library staff at Iowa State that attempts to weed out obsolete or otherwise unneeded serials have met with almost complete failure. We have been hard put to find faculty members who show enthusiasm for the discarding of any serial or a portion of it. In the area of duplication, however, we have gone ahead with our own program without any particular reference to faculty members as to which titles to weed out of the collections. By way of an example, one such project involves the discarding of duplicate copies of back volumes of bound journals in the fields of engineering which once were shelved in the Engineering Reading Room, a facility separate from the central library. After a period of five to ten years these journals have been returned to the central library and have been placed promptly in our Library Storage Building, where they have been gathering dust.

Section 3 of the questionnaire pertains to practices and policies relating to the purchasing of serials. The bases used by reporting libraries in determining from whom they obtain serials vary quite widely. An obvious generalization is that libraries use such basic criteria as quality of service and lowest prices. For domestic serials the practice of using subscription agencies, not always found to be satisfactory, is quite common. Often non-trade publications issued by societies, academies, and other organizations are purchased directly from the publishing group. Upon occasion other types of domestic serials are purchased directly from publishers. A few libraries reported sending out lists of current serials for bids.

In the area of foreign serials many libraries prefer, whenever possible, to use dealers in the country of origin. However, domestic dealers are also used in purchasing foreign serials. Some titles are obtained directly from the publishers. No two libraries seem to have arrived at the same solution.

For back sets the common practice is to purchase on the basis of bids received from dealers and publishers. A variation of this method is to order from dealers' catalogs after comparing prices, provided that more than one listing can be found.

Libraries were also asked whether or not they placed subscriptions on an "until forbid" basis. Fifty-eight of them reported in the affirmative. Four used this basis for some of their orders, and for other titles annual renewal purchase orders are issued. Three other libraries do not use the "until forbid" basis, because of state regulations. One library reported not using this basis for orders because it wanted to conduct frequent reviews of its subscription list.

A major aspect of the acquisition of serials is an exchange program in which locally available publications are exchanged for serials, and books in some instances, which are issued by other universities as well as by other sources, such as societies, academies, and institutes. It is very important that this program be conducted on an international basis, including exchanges with agencies in Iron Curtain countries. We have found at Iowa State that some serials published in Iron Curtain countries, for example, can most readily be obtained by exchange and that, indeed, in some instances this seems to be the only method of securing them.

Thirty libraries responding to the questionnaire indicated that they have satisfactory exchange programs. Others reported exchange programs, but did not indicate whether or not they are satisfactory. Twelve libraries are not satisfied with their exchange programs, the two principal difficulties appearing to be a lack of publications available for exchange and a shortage of personnel to handle this work. The consensus was, however, that an exchange program is essential. At Iowa State we consider such a program to be indispensable and have had one in operation for decades.

Because in Iowa there has been talk of setting up a state purchasing agency, an especially interesting set of figures to me is the one which deals with the practices of other states in this regard. Libraries responding to the question of whether or not their purchases are conducted on a bid basis indicated that 56 do not do so. Of the ten libraries which are required to buy on the basis of bids, seven said that they did all or only a part of the buying in this way. Two answered in the affirmative, but said that in actual practice they did not follow this procedure. One library indicated that bids were used only occasionally.

Of greatest interest to me, and incidentally a topic upon which I have had no experience, is automation, comprising input and output data processing equipment. From the 66 libraries responding to the questionnaire, I received replies from 49 that no such devices had been put into service as yet. Nine libraries indicated that they now use IBM or other equipment for fiscal controls which, as I understand the term, includes such operations as placing subscriptions, making renewals, and entering payments of invoices. Six other libraries reported that automation equipment is not being used at present, but that plans or studies are under way which look forward to the possibility of the use of such equipment in the near future. A common type of recording device in use today, according to the returns on the questionnaire, is the edge punched card.

At Iowa State we use a visible checking file comprised of 5" x 8" cards of receipts plus other information, including a record of prices, expiration date, binding information, and destination of receipts. In addition, we are planning to develop a second record. When funds

are available, this second record will be on IBM punched cards which we will use to identify and to separate our serials information by subject, country of origin, dealer, price, date of subscription expiration, and location on campus. We feel that this record, along with the visible file checking record, will give us the information which has been badly needed for more than 40 years. I might add, further, that we have no plans or even thoughts of resorting to magnetic tape to post receipts or to post holdings of serials. Our holdings are listed on the visible checking file and in the card catalog and the shelf list. The card catalog contains a record of holdings by means of this statement: "Library has a complete set of this periodical beginning with" If volumes are lacking, a record of missing volumes is made.

As a result of my lack of experience with automation techniques, I can say nothing about the advantages and disadvantages of their use. I am of the opinion, however, that the adoption of automation equipment does not necessarily mean a reduction of personnel, but that it does mean the availability of more and better records, all of which are really essential to the control and utilization of serial publications. I would like to urge that library schools which have not already done so include in their curricula at the earliest possible date courses in the use of automation equipment, not only for the fiscal controls of the serials operation but of all library processes amenable to automation.

The final section of the questionnaire deals with the methods of handling serials before processing for use. I have already commented upon the great diversity of central serials records. As reported, these records include the visible checking file, the card catalog, the shelf list, and separate serials lists. These records, as a rule, exclude holdings of documents. In the organization of many libraries, documents are treated separately from other publications. At Iowa State all serials, whether documents or not, are processed and shelved together according to subject matter. All serials relating to agriculture, for example, are shelved in a single location except that some of the publications are in storage because of a lack of shelf space in the library. The first addition to the library building, opened on September 11, 1961, is so small that over 25 per cent of the bound serials in the book collections have had to be retained in storage.

The next inquiry on the questionnaire was in regard to the maintenance of a visible checking file for recording receipts. Fifty-three libraries reported that such a file was used. The amazing element, however, is the variation in the size of the card used for this purpose. Many of them, as you might expect, are edge punched cards. Sizes listed include 3" x 5", 4" x 6", 3" x 3 1/4", 4 3/4" x 6", 3 7/8" x 5 7/8", and 5" x 8". Most frequently used was the 4" x 6" card on which is recorded such information as call number, holdings, publisher or dealer and address, current receipts, current payments, and order number.

The final inquiry on the questionnaire deals with the handling of bindery preparation. This work is rather commonly done by the serials department, whether it be as a separate unit or as a part of an acquisitions unit. In many instances bindery preparation is done by the periodicals division. In other instances it is administered by those who are in charge of book collections purchased from allocated funds. Personally, I favor the work of bindery preparation being handled by the serials unit, although I can understand that in some forms of library organization this would not be the best way to do it.

In closing, and I must admit this proposal is not relevant to the topic under discussion, I want to recommend that the tercentenary of the birth of serials, which will occur on January 5, 1965, be suitably celebrated. It will then be 300 years since the French serial Journal des Scavans was started. Its instant and enthusiastic acceptance assured an important role for serials in academic and other investigative and research groups. Two months afterward, the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London made its first appearance. In my opinion, we simply must not let this important anniversary go unnoticed.

REFERENCES

1. "College and University Library Statistics, 1958/59," College and Research Libraries, 21:28-31, 36, 39, January 1960.