Serial Subscription Agencies

WILLIAM H. HUFF

DURING THE PAST TWO decades the dramatic growth in the publication of serials has produced a variety of significant changes in the handling of this form of literature. In addition to modifications in the programs of the serial agencies themselves, there has been the development of specialized supply houses for microform serials, and of reprint sets of back files of journals. The flurry of publication in serial form during this period was a historical first and hopefully will not be repeated. The amount of money allocated for serial services, such as abstracts and indexes, and for the journals themselves has reached the point where many budgets are being ravenously consumed by this form of library material.

There is the very real possibility that certain strains of the scholarly journal which developed over the past decade or so are slated for total extinction or, at the very least, drastic modifications. Microforms may well replace many of the slick and formal “scholarly journals” which are now reproduced in amoeba-like fashion. Some of this activity is an effort to provide an answer to the problems posed by the academic syndrome—“publish or perish.” In order to fulfill the need for swift dispensation of information regarding research projects, there is presently an increase in the use of mimeograph papers distributed within the scholarly community among persons interested in a particular discipline. The time elapsed between the date an article is submitted to a journal and the date of its publication is frequently extensive. Bibliographical control through standard index services may, unfortunately, be bypassed and increased reliance placed on expanded nationwide networks of information clearinghouses in various disciplines such as those developed by the Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC). In the event these changes transpire, an entire segment of serials may no longer be viable products for subscription agents to handle in any significant quantity.

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Problems of direct importance to the supplying of periodicals involve short publisher discounts and the resulting service charges, increased operating overhead, and increased rates in mailing. In addition to rising subscription costs, librarians are also vitally concerned about the present efforts to determine fair use in reproducing copyrighted material such as journal articles, entire newsletters, reports, etc., in terms of remuneration to the copyright holder and costs which the library may have to assume.

Articles on the Sisyphean labor involved in acquiring periodicals and other serial publications appear perennially. Each year various facets of this business function of determining the most economical method of handling subscriptions in terms of time and money prove to be items receiving attention by both librarians and vendors alike. They all confirm the fact that the choosing of a subscription agent is not an exact science.

*Guide to Magazine and Serial Agents* by Bill Katz and Peter Gallatly, published in late 1973, covers in depth the major issues (and a significant number of the minor ones) which are a constant concern among librarians, agents and publishers. Their thorough analyses, resulting from surveying 850 various types of libraries (of which 95 percent employ one or more agents), probe the problems of orders, claims, payments, correspondence, pricing, discounts, service charges, and costs, as well as the relationship of the library to serials in general. It is a volume which brings together a staggering amount of information about serial work, serial agents, and related subjects which until now existed in fragmented form or had not been codified at all.

The heightened attention to these matters is not difficult to understand when one accepts the above-mentioned fact that the proportion of the budget of libraries all across the country being used to purchase new serial titles and to maintain ones already being received has become a threat to overall acquisition policies. In some instances this consumptive factor has reached as high as 70 percent, particularly among large college and university libraries. The economics of having a good agent are difficult to evaluate. Up until about twenty years ago there were agents who also provided very personalized treatment; they tailored their services and facilities to the collection-building programs of the particular libraries they were serving. Some of the things they did are now legendary. Through their resourcefulness giant serial collections were built.

These are the same collections that the industrial entrepreneurs
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and opportunists in the library publications world utilized in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s to build up fantastic storehouses of reprint volumes and microform products, which are now readily and easily available through such agencies as Kraus Reprint, Abrahams Magazine Service (AMS) and University Microfilms. What once had to be obtained on brittle paper, unbound or in poor binding, can now be acquired attractively cased, neatly embossed, and on paper of Barrow quality, capable of withstanding the acids of time—if you but have the funds.

The large number of serial titles efficiently handled by large agencies, such as EBSCO, Faxon and Stechert-Macmillan, is largely made possible because of technological developments which have appeared in the past two decades. I would be slow to subscribe to the idea of invention and “mother” necessity, but the occurrence of such developments at a time when the serial population was exploding was certainly opportune.

THE PAST

In looking back to the initial appearances of advertisements in the Library Journal, one finds various statements by periodical agents. Among them was Lemcke & Buechner (London, Leipzig, Paris), a firm bringing its services to the attention of the United States. Although citing an office at 812 Broadway, New York, this new location was not included in the letterhead. The firm offered foreign periodicals at the lowest rates and had as its most important competitor Gustav E. Stechert. Stechert had indicated his office in the United States at Nine East Sixteenth Street, New York, and emphasized that he was “the only importer in America, who employs no Agents, but has his own offices at: London, Paris [and] Leipzig... where experienced clerks and assistants attend carefully to the orders from New York.”

Stechert established his serial operation in 1872, four years before the American Library Association was formed. His advertisements provided the following information:

1.—The receipt of every order is acknowledged at once;
2.—Orders are sent to my European offices twice a week;
3.—Shipments from London, Paris and Leipzig are received every week, hence I can import: from London in 3 to 4 weeks; from Paris in 4 weeks; from Leipzig in 4 to 5 weeks;
4.—Orders which could not be filled at once are reported;

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5.—Out of print and scarce items are hunted up. Of such works a list in form of a card catalogue is made up and is constantly before the eyes of the clerks;

6.—A list of continuations is kept of works being published in consecutive volumes. Such volumes are supplied as soon as published without a reminder from the customer;

7.—Patterns of bindings are taken from all specially bound first volumes;

8.—Periodicals are imported flat in bales by fastest steamers and delivered to my customers cheaper, quicker, and in better condition than by mail from abroad.

Stechert also pointed out that he was in direct communication and had accounts with all European publishers and dealers. Therefore, he emphasized that he did not pay any commission to agents, “but always got the bottom price and often an extra discount.” He emphasized that the librarian saved the cost and labor of correspondence to various European firms and thus had to keep only one account. Another saving resulted from reduced mail costs, since:

As shipments are received Weekly: "Mondays from England and France and Thursday from Germany," no order, large or small, needs to wait for accumulation of material. If books from England, France, and Germany are ordered, these books will congregate at New York from where they will be sent in one shipment, thereby saving the expense of packing, freight, consular fees, Custom House charges, cartage, etc.

There were other dealers in serials; A.S. Clark, "Bookseller and Newsdealer," who was also operating from New York, constantly ran an ad stating: "I WISH TO REPEAT, 'that if you have tried in vain to secure a missing number or volume of a magazine, if your list has come back repeatedly, marked "O.P.," "can’t find," etc, etc., then the time has arrived when my services may avail.'" Elsewhere he claimed: "I offer to supply with reasonable promptness and cost, articles from magazines and reviews, upon any topic. If lists are made by the aid of 'Poole’s Index,' please observe method therein contained." In regard to supplying magazines he stated:

I will undertake to supply any magazine or review published, at a price per copy depending upon its market value, or the cost of finding same, if not on hand. I have considerably over 500,000 magazines in stock, and the assortment is as varied as the produc-
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tion of the periodical press for the last one hundred years. A Business-like quer? with list of wants will be met by a prompt and business-like reply.7

The problems of today's costs for serial subscriptions, and the variety of pricing policies among subscription agents involving service charges, itemized and buried, provide an opportunity for interesting and at times dismaying comparisons when one examines all the good things promised and the end result.

The simplicities of the early years regarding invoicing, discounts, service charges, etc. are unidentifiable today, as are the modes for acquiring serials. A few years ago, before the money streams dried up, it was not at all unusual for a new state-supported satellite university library to be supplied with funding from a variety of sources, grants, and special allocations, in addition to the significant base sum from the state with which to begin the new collection. Complete files of sets of reprinted serial publications and/or full files of serial titles in various types of microform were readily available for a fee.

This was not always so and it was with great diligence that the serial collections were built which were to provide today's offhand, non-bookman approach to collection building. For instance, advertisements published by the Boston Book Company in 1896 point out the sudden recognition of the importance of complete back runs of serials:

The use of Poole's Index has made sets of periodicals an essential part of every library. Such sets ought to be absolutely perfect—text, titles, plates, and indexes. An imperfect set is a constant irritation to the reader and to the librarian.

In buying, it is wiser to get from a responsible source sets guaranteed to be complete, than to run the risk of getting an imperfect set because it appears to be cheaper. Time, worry, and money are usually saved—in the long run—by buying perfect and solidly-bound sets. But it is difficult to find perfect sets. Until recently, the only way to get them was to seize whatever partial sets turned up at sales, or in second-hand lists, and then spend years in filling gaps.

Realizing that the increased use of periodicals was thus adding to the worries of library work, we have undertaken the hunting, collecting, perfecting, collating, and (if desired) the binding of long sets of periodicals, in order to save librarians all this detail, and to
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furnish them with sound and complete sets at reasonable prices. Mr. Frederick W. Faxon . . . goes to London to manage our foreign agency until November next. He is so familiar with the needs of American libraries that he will be able to serve them efficiently, while abroad, in procuring or perfecting foreign sets.

Even prior to this, the supplying of journals to libraries and individuals in the early nineteenth century had begun to pose problems for book agents which they had not encountered in the less complex matter of marketing monographs. In 1872, Frederic Leyboldt began publishing the official organ of the Publishers' Board of Trade and the Book Trade Association of Philadelphia, The Publishers' and Stationers' Weekly Trade Circular; A Journal Devoted to the Interests of the Publishing, Printing, Book, Stationery, News, Music, Art, and Fancy Trades, and Associated Branches (now Publishers' Weekly). It appeared every Thursday and carried a section entitled "Journalistic," which cited new journal publications and various changes in old ones as well as a section, "Contents of Periodicals," which listed articles in current issues of selected periodicals. Leyboldt's publication incorporated the American Literary Gazette and Publishers' Circular, established in 1852 and one of the first commercially distributed publications to provide booksellers with up-to-date information about new serial titles; as a counterpart, the Publishers' Circular, published in London, began in 1837 and provided limited information on magazines and reviews.

GROWTH OF SERIALS

The growth of serial agencies has been a gradual one. The beginnings may be found in the development of specialization in handling reviews and journals by certain booksellers early in the nineteenth century. Frequent references made by companies such as F.W. Faxon and Stechert-Macmillan to their historic roots as serial agencies can be found by tracing their genealogical ancestry to early bookseller ads. Such relationships include that of Gustav Stechert to the present Stechert-Macmillan Company, or Frederick W. Faxon's years with the Boston Book Company. Periodical agencies are among the earliest of library supply houses and probably have only one type of agency that predates them—suppliers of library furniture and equipment. Although the twentieth century is regarded as the age of serials (as the eighteenth century was one of pamphlets and the nineteenth of
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books), it is only within the past two decades that periodicals and their suppliers have really found their way into the limelight.

One gauge of this influx may be obtained by examining several editions of The Faxon Librarians' Guide to Periodicals and American Subscription Catalog. In the 1932-33 season it listed 1,150 titles "American and English"; the 1942-43 edition carried 2,000 titles "American and Foreign"; the 1952-53 edition listed "over 2,500 American and Foreign" titles; the 1963 edition, 3,000; and the 1973 edition provided an alphabetical listing of over 50,000 "American and International Periodicals." The 1976 guide contains listings referring to their file of more than 70,000 titles. Comparable growth statistics may be profiled for other agencies, but this example will serve to illustrate the exponential explosion in serials which has developed in recent years, and its impact on subscription agencies.

In determining the size of the "serial population" there are always variables. It depends largely on who is supplying the statistics and how the word "serial" is defined. The introduction to the two-volume set of New Serial Titles; 1950-1970 Subject Guide, published by R.R. Bowker Company (1975), provides a reasonably reliable analysis:

The total number of current serial publications in the major files in the United States is estimated at 360,000. The New Serial Titles 1950-1970, which includes all the titles reported by the 800 collaborating U.S. and Canadian libraries during this period, contains 220,000 titles. Between 1971 and 1975 another 50,000 titles are expected to be added. One third of these titles are in Science and Technology. The Bowker Serials Bibliography, an international, selective list of current serials including titles which are abstracted and indexed, subscribed to by major libraries, handled by major subscription agencies, etc., contains 80,000 titles. There are 30,000 titles overlapping between the two files. The Standard Periodical Directory carries 60,000 U.S. and Canadian titles. Tens of thousands of titles of local importance are not centrally listed. In addition to the current titles, there is a large number of ceased serials. The retrospective files of ceased serial titles at the New York Public Library and Library of Congress have more than a million entries.

A survey showed that the 80,000 current titles in the Bowker Serials Bibliography file covers approximately 90 percent of the needs of any major library in the U.S. in every subject field, except the subject area of the special library. To try to cover the remaining 10
percent, four times more titles should be added. The maintenance of such a file could not be economically justified.\textsuperscript{11}

The American Council of Learned Societies is presently supporting a two-year study under the direction of Edward E. Booher. The study, which has federal and foundation financing, will examine the need and value of the continuing proliferation of scholarly and scientific journals which presently results in the publication of trivia by young scholars who are faced with the “publish or perish” syndrome mentioned earlier. The investigation will consider such factors as duplication among the journals, bibliographic methods, and technological innovations in publishing. It is estimated that 10,000 scholarly and scientific journals are published in the United States alone, and there is much concern about the quality and cost of this material at a time when budget problems are striking a majority of libraries of all types.

A VIEW OF SUBSCRIPTION AGENCY FUNCTIONS

The subscription agency functions primarily as a single source through which library orders are channeled to the publisher. It is also an organization which provides an expedient method of handling and standardizing the invoicing of hundreds or thousands of publications, eliminating the inundation of the serials librarian through the receipt of invoices in various sizes, shapes and informational complexities. The major ingredient sold by subscription agencies, therefore, is service and, as pointed out from time to time, librarians and purchasing officers misunderstand the subscription agencies' mission by wrongly assuming that since payment was sent to them, the agency has a contract to provide the periodicals. In fact, once the agent has placed the orders with the publisher, the agent's major function has been completed and the basic contractual agreement fulfilled.

The following concise statement presents the basics:

A subscription agency has as its goals three fundamental functions:
1. Accurate, prompt placement of new orders.
2. Speedy and vigorous attention to claims and adjustments.
3. Timely renewal of expiring subscriptions.\textsuperscript{12}

Agencies also provide various levels of bibliographic assistance such as catalogs, some of them quite sophisticated and filled with otherwise difficult-to-locate information. In general, all state that they are willing to stand behind the services advertised.
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Agents are usually prepared to offer whatever “bonds” are required to comply with individual library procedures and/or the various local regulations, as well as to submit references upon request. Established magazine agencies encourage prospective customers to make inquiries to the leading publishers relative to the agency's soundness, and some encourage checking Dun & Bradstreet for the agency's rating.

However, there are always unforeseen events which bring about the downfall of the mightiest in all fields of endeavor. Thus, we have the dissolving of the Richard Abel Company, the reorganization of Stechert-Hafner, now Stechert-Macmillan, and the merging of the Mayfair Agency with Franklin Square Agency, all of which merged into EBSCO Subscription Services, as did Universal Periodical Services.

Domestic and foreign agencies are evaluated among librarians in a variety of ways, usually with subjective overtones. Consideration is given to the promptness with which subscriptions are entered and service started, clarity in invoicing and ease in making reductions or other adjustments, response time to claims and general correspondence, flexibility relative to subscription adjustment, reliability in handling standing orders, and supplementary invoicing or “bill backs.”

In the case of foreign agents such as Blackwell, Harrassowitz, or Nijhoff, special consideration is given relative to the communication problem and also relative to their manner of supplying journals in separate shipments, such as Nijhoff does. Unless there is specific pressure to try to speed up delivery by ordering directly, it certainly is easier to handle foreign serials with an agent.

Katz and Gellatly, in the book cited above, have covered this matter of agent evaluation more thoroughly than has ever been done before. Anyone interested in this subject could do no better than to consult it.

In their introduction they state:

This guide is an effort to indicate the best type of subscription agent for a particular library. Librarians accepting two premises—that most agents are reliable and that most librarians should employ agents—need not withhold criticism of the individual agent or agents. . . . For a library with more than one hundred periodical titles on order, it is generally a good idea to employ an agent. This is so even in the case of an agent whose service charge is from 5 to 20 percent. A section is given over to charges, but from the beginning one point should be made clear to all readers: agents are not in business for their health; they have to charge the library for services. . . . Given the charges, hidden or apparent, it still is more
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economic and efficient to employ a subscription agent for periodicals and other types of serials. Not all librarians agree, and their arguments are summarized later on.1

Subscription agencies vary in the manner in which they assess service charges. Some dealers make a flat charge for processing every new subscription, and across-the-board service charges ranging from 5 percent to 20 percent for maintaining existing ones. Librarians should exercise caution in accepting across-the-board service charges, or at least examine their subscription list carefully to see if it contains expensive items for which a standard unit charge per title could add greatly to the total cost. In such cases it may prove financially advantageous to handle these items through the publishers.

Lists comprised largely of popular titles may well provide a significant discount to the agent and eliminate the need for a service charge. Universal Periodical Subscription Agency points out what is also applicable to others: that their organization does not receive a commission from all publishers, which is their primary source of profit. Moreover, there is generally no set profit margin extended to an agent for a periodical. As a result, a list of periodicals from one library may provide a discount to cover handling costs and provide a margin of profit for the agent, whereas another library’s list may include titles with short discounts or none at all. The result is that a service charge must be made. Experience has shown that lists with titles heavy in the area of science/technology or business items frequently require a handling charge. These matters of periodical costs, library costs for processing serials, agency charges, and estimating added charges and other related expenditures are examined in detail both from the points of view of the subscription agent and of the librarian in Katz and Gellatly.

The majority of subscription agents make an effort to provide “extras” in terms of considerations for late payments, the handling of sticky bid problems, and maintenance of complex payments files and data to expedite claiming. However, there are occasional exceptions to any rule. Katz and Gellatly report that the Federal Trade Commission early in the 1970s found it necessary to investigate charges of deceptive tactics among some field agents relative to selling long-term magazine subscriptions.

Although one may subscribe to the idea that there exists no overwhelming problem with subscription agencies regarding pricing, placing of subscriptions, and general service charges, a gray area
remains which requires brief attention. Some of the promises cited above, although probably made in good faith, are most difficult to keep—if not impossible. The promises are sometimes the product of an overly enthusiastic ad writer’s pen, and are always optimistic.

Agents and regional managers have been known to agree with serial librarians that some of the claims made in boldface type in advertisements and brochures do not spell out the basic fact, which is that these claims are presented with the assumption that you have read the fine print or asked a representative the proper questions. To illustrate this point, the following are brief excerpts from some publishers’ brochures: Popular Subscription Service claims that it “can satisfactorily supply any periodical published anywhere in the world” and assures the subscriber the “BEST POSSIBLE SERVICE AND RATES” for any and all magazine subscriptions available on the subscription market.” Regarding the clientele it serves, Popular Subscription Service, in its 1976 Directory of Periodical Listings, makes the following statement: “We herewith invite your interest to the most up to date subscription service available with complete satisfaction guaranteed.” Its directory contains about 4,000 titles which schools and libraries most frequently order, although it does claim to service some 50,000 titles.

Universal Periodical Services (now an EBSCO affiliate) regards itself as a part of the library’s staff, stating:

**Universal** is a full-service subscription agency—an extension of the library’s periodical acquisitions department—ready to expedite orders for periodicals, serials, newspapers, newsletters, back-issues, continuations, irregulars, annuals, transactions, proceedings, standing orders, by-volume orders, memberships, and government publications—all titles that can be ordered through an agency.

The process of making thousands of current journals available when needed has become a highly specialized task. Ultimately, however, there is still only one need: the **proper delivery, on time, to the subscriber.**

Another dimension of the matter of good business relationships with subscription agencies involves their working with the publishers, which is reflected in the following statement from Popular Subscription Service:

We pay for all subscriptions in advance. We cannot guarantee the
solvent of publisher the continued publication of any periodical.

We act as your agent and hold ourselves fully responsible for promptly processing your order with the publisher.

Occasionally a periodical is discontinued and the publisher does not make an adjustment on a subscription in force. Since we have already paid for your subscription in advance, we cannot hold ourselves responsible. However, in most cases the publishers do make an adjustment and the same is then turned over to you. 16

For the most part, subscription agencies spell out what they regard as their responsibilities and make clear the areas in which they disclaim liability:

EBSCO’s obligation is to order subscriptions and service delivery or, if obtainable, substitution or refund. We guarantee entry and service of your order excepting publisher bankruptcy and other non-agent responsibilities. We cannot accept responsibility for government mails or final delivery. Our service after entry is prompt and exhaustive in securing timely delivery. 17

And in another EBSCO advertisement regarding services:

We gladly research any title ordered and do not expect the customer to provide publisher name and address. Our research cycle is thorough and provides a quick answer if we are unable to identify the publisher. We service titles from all nations of the world. The only titles we cannot (normally) service for you are order-direct by the publisher’s requirement. (However, if you are a librarian who desires to place 100 percent of all serials with a single agency, we can handle even the order-direct publishers for you.)

The parentheses in that last sentence are interesting afterthoughts and, with any imagination at all, give one the idea that special considerations regarding personal requirements are to be had at various levels depending on his gambling instinct. This is only good business and, if special considerations can be had from any agent having a proven track record, the amount of library staff time saved by not having to track down “directs only” will more than compensate for any cost. However, this may well be another example of an ad writer’s enthusiastic optimism.
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COST AND MARKETING FACTORS

Librarians can rarely supply figures on the amount of money involved in staff salaries, materials, and basic overhead in placing an order. An order in a large operation is frequently handled by many people whose salaries range from the high of the professional librarian to the low represented by a student's hourly wage.

The cost of handling a subscription in a library varies with the size of the unit and the complexity of the material, e.g., whether an academic publication in a foreign language or a popular title in English is being acquired. However, various studies have shown that professional, clerical and related overhead costs hover around an average figure of $25-$30 minimum with the figure escalating rapidly depending on the uniqueness of the situation. In their Librarians’ Handbook, EBSCO suggests the wide range of $6-$25 to issue and process a single serial order.

There is a trend toward fewer subscription agencies of larger size, the major ones in the United States being EBSCO Subscription Services and F.W. Faxon Company, which together handle nearly two-thirds of the subscriptions sold by agents to the library world. Both handle U.S. and foreign serials. Katz and Gellatly state that there are eight medium-sized domestic agents: Stechert-Macmillan (formerly Stechert-Hafner), Moore-Cottrell Subscription Agencies (absorbed the magazine function of Maxwell International Subscription Agency in 1974), Maxwell Group (Maxwell Scientific International and Microforms International), Universal Periodical Services, McGregor Magazine Agency, Read-More Publications, Instructor Subscription Agency, and Turner Subscription Agency. There are smaller agencies and some for which the demarcation line between medium-sized and small is thin. In addition, there are field agents working as subsidiaries of the large catalog agencies mentioned above, as well as numerous independent agencies.

In a paper delivered at a conference on serials management, Philip Greene referred to a 1972 report published by the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) which indicated that there were about 153 U.S. subscription agencies. These were full-service agencies, of which fewer than a dozen handled accounts with academic libraries. The emphasis in this segment of his paper was on academic libraries (college and university); school libraries and very small public libraries were excluded. The following figures were presented to
provide some reference point as to the magnitude of the symbiotic relationship between the library and the subscription agency. Including junior colleges, it was estimated that there were 2,107 college and university libraries in the United States; approximately 5,000 research and special libraries; 2,546 health science libraries, excluding those with university affiliations; 4,000 public libraries with book budgets in excess of $10,000—bringing the total number of libraries considered to 13,653.

It was found that the 2,107 college and university libraries spent approximately $43 million per year for 2,150,000 periodicals. Serials other than periodicals (i.e., annuals, yearbooks, transactions) involve an estimated 1,353,000 items and account for the expenditure of an additional $40 million, or a total outlay of approximately $83 million annually. As to foreign agencies, it was estimated that there were one or two full-service agencies in each European, Asian, and South American country; foreign sales totaled somewhere in the neighborhood of $100 million per year. These figures are rising in view of the continuing increase in the quantity of published material; somewhat alarming is the continued increase in book and periodical prices when compared with general commodity costs. Serials in general (foreign and domestic) have been subjected to startling subscription price increases.

During the past sixteen years a number of serial cost indexes have developed. According to Library Journal, the average price in 1975 of an American periodical was $19.94—an increase of 13 percent over 1974. Table 1 provides additional comparisons. The price increases in commercial serials, particularly in the science/technology area, continue to provide the usual spectaculars with the cost of Chemical Abstracts rising from $2,400 in 1975 to $3,500 for 1976, and that of Mathematical Reviews from $280 in 1975 to $450 in 1976. In general, the journals published by the American Chemical Society and those published by the American Institute of Physics have had increases of more than 30 percent from 1975 to 1976 subscription rates.

Along with the high subscription prices in certain disciplines are built-in expenses in the form of double and triple rates for subscriptions to libraries as compared with those for personal subscriptions. A variety of journals in several subject areas published by several firms (for example, those published by Gordon and Breach) fall into this esoteric and expensive category.

There are also other groups of serials—such as those issued by Pergamon Press, Academic Press, McGraw-Hill, and others—which
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*Excluding "Wilson Index."


require careful shepherding and even more careful thought before introducing a third party—the subscription agency—to the rather regimented routines established by such publishers. This problem is aggravated by a new concern over the postal rate options these publishers are beginning to offer to libraries. This latter item is one which is rapidly becoming a major worry for both the library and the subscription agency. Subscription agencies are being faced with the need to increase prices further in view of new postal rates. Moreover, cost factors will mushroom in this area—and possibly compel a revamping of marketing procedures—if second class mailing privileges are revoked for newspapers and periodicals. A charge of this nature will almost guarantee higher subscription rates by publishers, as well as the possibility of new surcharges by agents. Librarians wince at the very thought of a continuing escalation in postal charges. The cost of first class postage for newspapers and journals seems prohibitive in view of the recent 30 percent rate increase.

An alternative, of course, is to send these materials third class bulk mail. However, one major supplier of serial services, Commerce Clearing House, recently did a survey and found that third class bulk mailing of their reports showed 1.6 percent reached their destination in four to six days; 82.1 percent took seven to fifteen days; 14.9 percent required sixteen to twenty-four days; and 1.4 percent spent a staggering twenty-five to thirty-four days in transit. It would appear that an answer must be found somewhere between these extremes if the general dissemination of printed material and our free flow of information are not to receive a terrific setback. It is well known that certain types of publications lose their value unless received promptly. Such items include update services, advance sheets, weeklies, and indexes and abstracts, to mention only a few. For example, an invoice just received for the May 1976-April 1977 issues of the Journal of
Current Laser Abstracts advises that a $15.00 charge will be made for the option of first class mail delivery. The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited also has recently advised its subscribers that while postage was never charged before, new subscriptions beginning in 1976 will be assessed full postage charges which involve additional costs ranging from $6.00 to $25.00 for air mail, and from $2.00 to $5.00 for surface mail for each title.

Serial agencies are not "serial supply houses" and their operations should not be thought of in the same sense that the activities of suppliers of various physical commodities are examined in other papers in this volume. There are publishers who run a "closed shop," and through their circulation manager or fulfillment department handle all orders for their titles without the middleman—the agency. In her fine volume, Serials: Acquisition & Maintenance, Clara Brown cites eight types of serials in which the option of a subscription agent is not usually valid: (1) memberships (publications received through an institutional membership), (2) expensive items, such as Chemical Abstracts or translations, (3) services such as those provided by Commerce Clearing House or Prentice-Hall, (4) special items, such as the Polk Directories or city directories, (5) publications of societies and institutions, (6) little magazines or avant garde serials in general, (7) university publications, and (8) serial microforms. Documents in general and U.S. documents in particular are also best handled directly. Periodicals and other serials make up the major portion of the output of the U.S. Government Printing Office (U.S.G.P.O.) and in recent years have increased drastically in subscription price.

U.S.G.P.O. publications are handled through the Office of the Superintendent of Documents. It is a clearinghouse (with the problems of both a publisher and a subscription agency) for the many thousands of monographs, periodicals and other series published by the U.S.G.P.O. and originating from hundreds of federal government offices, agencies, bureaus, etc. U.S.G.P.O. serial subscriptions are usually accepted by the Superintendent of Documents’ office for a one-year period only unless otherwise specified. Exclusive of mailing time, a new subscription to U.S.G.P.O. journals requires from two to eight weeks processing time and once submitted it is virtually impossible to locate it until fed into the computer.

The Office of the Superintendent of Documents is saturated with acquisition requests. In November 1975 the plea was made: “PLEASE BE PATIENT. Frankly—we're swamped with orders in the Washington, D.C. Central Office.” The Assistant Public Printer, Carl A.
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LaBarre, went on to explain that the Superintendent of Documents' office had over 170,000 orders on hand and received an additional 15,000-20,000 daily. He added that everything possible was being done to improve service and reduce processing time. Modern warehousing and order processing space is being obtained and "components of a computerized order-fulfillment system are being developed." Problems involved in handling U.S.G.P.O. subscriptions expeditiously are further complicated because of the Superintendent of Documents discount policy, which makes it almost impossible for a subscription agency to handle U.S.G.P.O. periodicals without a surcharge. As of January 1, 1974, the following strict policy went into force:

A discount of 25 percent will be allowed to bookdealers when the publications, pamphlets, periodicals or subscription services are mailed, delivered or forwarded to the dealer's normal place of business.

No discounts will be allowed when the publication, pamphlet, periodical, or subscription service is mailed to a third party (unless in quantities of 100 or more), or on those periodicals or subscription services which fall into a special pricing category as noted in this Price List.

The fact that the volume of orders handled by U.S.G.P.O. is so huge and that U.S.G.P.O. is obligated to handle requests from the most diverse sources imaginable does not permit subscription agencies to receive special or favored treatment. Moreover, as a noncommercial venture in the broad profit-making sense, U.S.G.P.O. is neutral when it comes to handling an order from the J. Does of the United States or one from a subscription agency. Problems of correspondence, claims, and communications are procedurally limiting and allow little, if any, solution to the custom-made requirements of libraries.

U.S.G.P.O. serials have high birth and death rates. Although no actuarial tables are available, the general vital statistics are such that for every 100 that die, the likelihood is strong that another 100 will be born to take their places.

In addition to the restricted manner in which library U.S.G.P.O. subscriptions are handled, there is the matter of subscription costs. The cost of subscription prices for U.S. document serials, which for
years have been regarded as moderately priced, has risen substan-
tially (see Table 2).

There are very few subscription agencies who will handle
U.S.G.P.O. periodicals because of the distastefully high service
charges they must assess. In addition, the logistics of this form of
order in accordance with the Superintendent of Documents regula-
tions cited above produce a situation making this category of serials
one in which the use of a subscription agency may provide an
additional problem.

BIDDING

The grim specter of bids remains a continuing problem. It is
difficult to find serialists or subscription agents who do not find this
practice restricting and generally negative in terms of cost-effectiveness
and certainly in terms of service. In addition, the matter of
subscription continuity is jeopardized each time there is a vendor
change. Furthermore, the opportunity to take advantage of the
combination two- or three-year subscription rates possible with “til
forbid” orders is also lost if the library and agency are yoked to
regulations requiring annual bids.

High school libraries are frequently involved in bid system obliga-
tions as a result of municipal legislation or school board rulings.
However, many libraries (if not the majority) include in their bid
request statements which provide them with enough discretionary
leeway to offset the disaster of fly-by-night agents, although the
practice of not paying the agent until the subscription begins does
provide an element of guaranteed performance. If bid procedures
prevail, there is always the arduous task of preparing lists. With little
fear of contradiction, one can say that the amount of money saved in
actual cash payments will not offset the hidden overhead involved in
record changes throughout the system. One school contacted uses the
phrase: “The school district has the right to accept the bid which is in
the best interest of the district.” In talking with purchasing agents for
various public school units where bid systems are in force, they
occasionally take a chance on an “unknown” because of a low bid;
through conversations with other school administrators in charge of
purchasing, however, they most often receive advice on past per-
formance of agents which reduces the potential risk substantially.

The practice of requesting bids does not appear as strong in
medium-sized public libraries, although the use of this procedure
TABLE 2

SUBSCRIPTION PRICES FOR U.S. DOCUMENTSERIALS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1972</th>
<th>1974</th>
<th>1975</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Education</td>
<td>$4.50</td>
<td>$9.95</td>
<td>$13.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Conditions Digest</td>
<td>15.00</td>
<td>45.80</td>
<td>55.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code of Federal Regulations</td>
<td>195.00</td>
<td>350.00</td>
<td>350.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce Business Daily</td>
<td>25.00</td>
<td>63.50</td>
<td>75.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of State Bulletin</td>
<td>16.00</td>
<td>29.00</td>
<td>42.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index Medicus</td>
<td>63.00</td>
<td>155.00</td>
<td>173.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear Science Abstracts</td>
<td>42.00</td>
<td>75.50</td>
<td>121.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey of Current Business</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>34.45</td>
<td>48.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Documents Division of the Serials Department, University of Illinois Library.

varies greatly and is largely determined by local legislation; libraries which are units in governmental agencies are probably most often those faced with the bidding process. Large public libraries face other problems in this area, and in some cases the attempt by the larger municipality to avoid the slightest tinge of corrupt practice results in bids made not only on the major portion of the serial collection but with subordinate bids made to handle journals in specific subject areas. In academic libraries the practice of dealing with serial acquisitions in terms of bids is most reprehensible, particularly in large libraries.

The practice of bidding on services from a subscription agency is not equivalent to that of bidding on static items such as tables, electrical equipment, and stationery. Subscriptions to serials are dynamic things. The titles change, merge, die, and undergo amoebic generations that cannot be foreseen. Therefore, reliance must be placed on the ability of the subscription agency to handle these changes, which generate mountains of paperwork. Each purchase of a serial title is certainly a separate business transaction, but what is being bid upon is the ability of the subscription agency to handle through a single invoice the hundreds of invoices from hundreds of publishers which would swamp most library staffs. The value of an agency is in its efficient management of these business matters and its provision of additional service through handling claims for missing issues, correspondence regarding billing and credit adjustments, bibliographical problems, cancellations, and a vast variety of situations.
stemming from various types of orders to the need for common expiration dates. EBSCO sums up its feeling on the matter of bids in a succinct manner which might well receive the endorsement of other agents and librarians alike:

Service is our foremost goal, and our established service capability sometimes makes it possible for us to offer you the lowest price obtainable. However, seasoned buyers know of the necessity of good service on periodicals and that strict competitive bid buying most often makes award to an organization with lowest operating costs and least ability to provide good service. Competitive bid acquisition of physically definable commodities sometimes makes sense, the procedure works poorly when applied to the acquisition of continuing services.25

The phrase “lowest responsible bidder” carries both buried meaning and broad legal overtones. The federal government has provided its procurement agencies with some guidelines in this respect, which are severely condensed here but covered fully by Miles Price.26 The supplier should: (1) have adequate financial resources or ability to secure same; (2) have necessary experience, organization, technical qualification, and facilities to handle the contract; (3) have ability to comply with delivery schedule; and (4) have satisfactory record for performance, integrity, judgment, and skills.

Thus, when a library gets into the matter of using a bid system to obtain a subscription agency capable of handling all types of serials for all types of libraries, it is tantamount to a search for the Holy Grail; this has provoked many frustrations and limited success from its less-than-perfect seekers.

CONSOLIDATION, COORDINATION, AND COOPERATION: SOME OBSERVATIONS

The significant changes which have taken place in subscription agencies within the past decade have been primarily computer-oriented. Such phrases as “on-line retrieval of customer accounts” and “on-line retrieval of publisher’s records” have become commonplace. The whole concept of tailoring a customer’s account through machine programming to take care of special invoicing or other unique requirements for a particular institution, combined with the use of a cathode-ray tube and related computer facilities, have become standard business practices in many companies. A growing
number of subscription agents are handling their operations through the use of computer technology. What was experimental ten years ago has become standard operating procedure today, and EBSCO, Faxon, and Stechert-Macmillan, among others, have provided many libraries with their first introduction into the world of computerization. However, a world flanked by computers has a long way to go before such service can be bought without premonitions—some of which have become all too harshly real. Subscription agencies compete keenly with each other and the profit motive stands in the way of voluntary cooperation. The large continue to engulf the small—or at least make it impossible for them to compete. As mentioned earlier, the trend is toward a few large subscription agencies with many regional subsidiaries.

Coordination and cooperation are words which trip readily off the tongues of personnel both inside and outside the library world. However, even the grim realities of severely reduced budgets have yet to make these concepts totally functional. The development of the Center for Research Libraries and its Journal Access Program, bolstered heavily through a liaison with the British Lending Library, has enjoyed only limited success. The effect of such joint efforts by libraries on subscription agencies is reduced orders. The matter of serving many libraries through a single subscription does pose new financial problems for them and, in turn, for the libraries. If some form of differential pricing of subscriptions evolves, serial budgets and serial acquisition policies will have to be reworked with the new philosophy in mind.

The continuing high cost of serials and the increasing number of titles being published is compelling the library community to cooperate and share resources. The idea is excellent but does have logistical problems which, coupled with the "territorial imperative" syndrome, sometimes make things run less than smoothly.

One approach emphasizes geographical compact units such as the Research Libraries Group (RLG), a consortium comprised of the New York Public Library and the libraries of Harvard, Yale, and Columbia. The RLG offers access to a total of 30 million volumes through the use of the telephone, tie-lines, and the United Parcel Service delivery. However, as with any such complex arrangement, there are many problems that do not appear on the surface, such as the development of common procedures, ongoing funding, and handling the growing copyright problems.

Cooperation on a broader scale is to be found in policies being
developed at the Center for Research Libraries (CRL) in Chicago. At the present time CRL, with funds received from the Carnegie Corporation and supported by dues from CRL member libraries, provides access to a large number of periodical titles. These shared resources reduce the need for CRL members to subscribe to thousands of titles made available through the Journal Access Program. This program is amplified by arrangements with the British Library Lending Division (BLLD) to obtain photocopies of articles from journals held by BLLD. Investigations into cooperative measures to handle the problems of reducing the number of serial subscriptions, which directly affects the financial structure of the subscription agency, are being pursued at the national level in the United States. The National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) has organized a task force to examine the possibilities of establishing a national periodicals system. This task force is to review an early study done by the Association of Research Libraries, Access to Periodical Resources: A National Plan. The alternatives brought up by this study—such as regional centers backed up by resources of research libraries of a center patterned after the British Lending Library—will be studied. In its 1974/75 Annual Report the NCLIS made the following statement regarding the development of a national serials center:

The serials group also recognized the pragmatic necessity of a separate program for serials, and because there is already a serious problem in providing access to serials, recommended that priority be given this effort; a recommendation that the full conference endorsed. Here also, an immediate beginning with existing resources as a base was urged. Since access to a relatively small number of currently published “core” journals would meet the needs of most user groups, early attention was recommended to developing an accessible collection of this heavily-used core as the beginning of a National Serials Center or Centers. Depending on the number of centers established, subscription services would be variously affected as far as reducing the number of copies of periodicals required by network libraries throughout the country.

Networks have become increasingly important in the new, economy-motivated efforts to consolidate resources and share serial subscriptions. The expansive possibilities of network cooperation have been singularly evidenced by the pragmatic success of the Ohio
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College Library Center (OCLC) from which have emanated many "nets." OCLC has now begun training librarians in the use of the OCLC Serials Check-in Component. This is the first of the three components in the OCLC Serials Control Subsystem; the claiming and binding controls have no definite date for implementation. As a result of the Conversion of Serials (CONSER) Project there are presently over 90,000 serial records in the on-line union catalog at OCLC.50

Many other changes are afoot in the handling of serials which will have both major and minor influences on the relations between subscription agencies and libraries. These changes in process range from the development of the MARC (machine-readable cataloging) format for serials, the National Serials Data Program (NSDP), the International Standard Serials Number (ISSN), International Serials Data System (ISDS), to the International Standard Bibliographic Description for Serials (ISBD-S). The cataloging of these selected activities is not to imply that all will have equal and grave importance to the transactions between subscription agencies and all libraries in the immediate future, although some are presently quite viable factors relative to MARC, NSDP and ISSN. However, all are elements in the developing programs involving the acquisition and bibliographical control of serials. Incorporation of other factors will depend on the outcome of the present copyright controversy relative to photocopying journals and parts of journals in terms of "fair use" for libraries and "fair compensation" for publishers, hopefully without developing into bookkeeping complexities. The development and implementation of divergent pricing policies by agents and/or publishers for subscriptions slated for regional or national periodical centers may well be expected. The multiple usage and expanded volume of photocopying in these centers for a single subscription to a scholarly journal will be measurable only by the membership roster of such centers which will come largely from college, university, and special libraries.

There is the strong possibility that an increasing number of serials will appear in microform only. Technological developments also indicate that large-scale expansion is continuing in the use of remote computer terminals, the development of which has made significant strides during the past several years—but in relatively limited situations. There is a strong need to continue in-depth investigation of the promises of the minicomputer and the capabilities of developing
library programs which are flexible enough to interface with programs written by subscription agencies. At present, there is still too much “blue-skying” (although greatly reduced from the 1960s), which contributes to a sense of instability and frustrates the expectation of easily shared serial bibliographic data on machine-readable records.

These continuing independent actions produce many islands of selective computer knowledge which are expensive and serve a limited, local need. At times they appear as archipelagos of expertise so hopelessly separated as never to be linked into a single working unit. As a result, library networks continue to develop on a primarily region-oriented basis, the centrum being a computer, a staff of system experts including a librarian or two, and a limited clientele to serve.

The development of the relationships between librarians and subscription agents and dealers in back-files of serials—either in original hard copy, reprints, or some aspect of microform—has been one which evolved simply from the handling of serials as a speciality of certain book dealers in the nineteenth century to the modern complex, computer-oriented subscription agency. The services offered reflect the advanced technology, and some provide free (or reasonably priced) elaborate catalogs with highly sophisticated and detailed information, supplying complete bibliographical profiles for thousands of serial titles which aid greatly in ordering and claiming on these materials. Back-file dealers put out equally elaborate catalogs which are bibliographically beautiful and provide in-depth information regarding hundreds of titles for which they can supply a complete file in hard copy or in microform. All in all, serial dealers, both in terms of service and in the acquiring of retrospective files, do a basically creditable job.

Katz and Gellatly found that 60-70 percent of the librarians they surveyed rated the majority of the subscription agents in a range from generally good to excellent. Their survey indicated that certain agents received their highest rating from certain types of libraries; i.e., one agent was most highly regarded by academic and special libraries, while the other received most plaudits from public and school libraries. As might be expected, any effort to assign ratings can run into trouble depending on the size of the sample, the source of the response, and the complexity of the operation. These are only a few of the variables, and any one could skew such evaluations. All five international agencies involved—Blackwell’s Harrassowitz, Martinus
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Nijhoff, Stevens & Brown, and Swets & Zeitlinger—received ratings ranging from good to excellent.¹

International agent extraordinaire, Gustav E. Stechert, and his contemporary continental operator, Fredrick W. Faxon, could in no way, it seems, have envisioned even with their special business acumen the seismographic effect serial publications would one day have on the economics of library book budget or the degree of technological sophistication that the future would require for the operating of a serial subscription agency or supply house for files of retrospective journals. Stechert's assurances mentioned earlier (that periodicals ordered through him would arrive cheaply, quickly and in the best of condition because they were "imported flat in bales by fastest steamers") refers to a time when things in general moved more slowly and anxieties were not so multitudinous or pronounced. However, several ingredients which they possessed (as do most successful agencies)—confidence, resourcefulness, imagination, and flexibility—were apparent then as now.

The need for more space and general changes in collecting policies as a result of "use studies" have made the once all-important search for complete sets of journals passé. An increasing number of libraries maintain more retrospective runs in microform serials, with backfiles of hard copy offered for auction, such as those sales conducted by Maxwell Scientific International/Microforms International Marketing Company.

The formerly grand idea of self reliance has, as a result of economics, space, and research use of journals, been transformed into resource sharing through network programs and the potential of a national serial program. The challenge of this computer generation continues to tease us with unclear visions of what someday "may be." The most important thing is that reasonably good rapport has been established between librarians and agents through joint participation in American Library Association programs, discussion groups, and the presentation of meaningful papers to library literature. This new dialog is not merely useful; its continuation is a necessity if librarians and subscription agencies are going to be able to act positively in solving mutually complex problems which are rapidly moving from the local to the national level.

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3. ______________.  [Advertisement], *Public Libraries* 1:34, May 1896.
4. ______________.  [Advertisement], *Library Journal*, op. cit.
7. Ibid.
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