

The Role of Serials in the Modern World

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What are Serials

There is a well known British game in which people are challenged to find the greatest number of pairs of words with the same sound but different spellings. Needless to say, the word "serials" often features. It will be not the first nor the last time that people believe that "serials" is some kind of breakfast food, or that the UK Serials Group is a farmers' lobby. In fact serials can be defined as any publication which continues on a serial basis, either regularly or irregularly. This definition covers periodicals, magazines, newspapers, books published as part of a series, and new innovatory products such as CD ROM which are purchased with a subscription and are updated on a regular basis. Most serials are bought using a subscription service, unlike monographs or reports not in series which can be paid for on an individual basis.

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The Advantage of Serials

The particular nature of serials gives them several advantages over other types of publications.

1. The information in them is usually much more up-to-date than in monographs.
2. The subscription system means that the publishing of material is done on a more certain basis. Cutting costs for the publisher and guaranteeing times of arrival for the user.

3. The unit cost of acquiring serial material are usually much lower than that for acquiring monographs.
4. The pattern of use within a serial run is much more easy to estimate than for individual monographs, so enabling better decisions to be made about the purchase and retention of individual titles.

Communication on Serials

In spite of the fact that over 70 per cent of the world's factual literature is conveyed in one form of serial or another co-operation and communication between different sectors of the serials industry is still a long way from perfection. Early in 1975 John Merriman, Head of the Periodicals Division at Blackwells, one of the world's leading booksellers and serial agents was able to put his concern about the lack of communication in the industry into practice. Through the good offices of Blackwells a prototype conference on serials was set up in Oxford. Out of this was formed a steering group which included such people as David Woodworth, a library school lecturer, who for a long time had been concerned about the lack of attention to serials in library school education; and David Wood, head of acquisitions at what is now the British Library Document Supply Centre at Boston Spa, which holds the largest working collection of current serial titles in the world. From their concerns and those of others grew the United Kingdom Serials Group which made one of its main aims to bring together librarians, publishers, serial agents and other information workers in the field of serials.

The Emergence of National Co-operation on Serials

One of the most important functions of the UKSG was to provide a forum where common problems could be discussed. Initially it was not just lack of communication but almost hostility between the libraries and members of the publishing industry which had to be overcome. This arose mainly from the librarian's erroneous belief that the increasing cost of serials was mainly due to the rapacious nature of the publishing industry. Much of the work of the early conferences of the UKSG were concerned with understanding the economics of

publishing and supply of serials. And although it was clear that certain publishers did make a healthy profit, nevertheless such factors as the falling pound and the rising cost of raw materials and labour were seen to contribute to the high cost of serials. While the cancellation policy of librarians themselves, albeit in response to reduced incomes, contributed to a price spiral effect. Finance was not the only matter shared in common between producers and users. Automation began to play an increasing important role in the serials world, and the problems of owning versus borrowing titles, the relegation of serials, and the way the national network operated were also factors for consideration.

Over the years the UKSG has made important contributions to education in serials by running on a regular basis seminars and conferences; to the library literature by the publication of its newsletter and proceedings of its conference, which are now encapsulated in a major serial title called appropriately "Serials"; encouraged participation and cross-fertilisation between different members of the serials industry by providing cost effective meetings; and by its emphasis on the human and personal side of its organisation helped to build up an invisible college of people concerned with similar problems from different perspectives.

How the National Serials Group Operates

Early in its formation the UKSG took a conscious decision not to be part of any previous organisation. Although separate organisations already existed to cater for the sectional interests of the serials industry it was felt inappropriate to lodge the new body, which represented all sectors, under the wing of any one would-be parent organisation. Such a status gave the UKSG a level of independence and freedom from traditional viewpoints which enabled it to take decisions effectively and efficiently.

Although each member of the committee was and is elected a strong tradition of continuity has always been maintained. No officer can stay in post for more than three years and there is a gradual replacement of committee members over a time. However, outside the formal structure of the committee there is a considerable network of informal contacts which the committee continually takes into account when making its decisions or testing new ideas. There is no preponderance of one particular sector on the committee, which makes for adequate representation from all facets of the serial industry, while at the same time reducing the rivalry effect often associated with bodies of

individuals who come from the same type of organisation. The committee has not allowed executive power to pass to a permanent secretariat but relies heavily on the services of a part-time administrator as well as practical help and logistic support from its constituent members. Other than the work put in by the administrator all committee time is on a voluntary basis and such is the standing of the UKSG in general with information organisations that administrative expenses are often partly offset by the constituent bodies subsidising their representatives on the committee. However, the UKSG does have a policy of financial independence so although overheads are kept to a minimum there is a membership fee. This fee covers the cost of the annual subscription to "Serials", and gives members the right to go to conferences and meetings at a reduced rate. Such an approach is consistent with the group's policy of providing maximum service to its members and to the wider world of serials at a minimum cost.

It is important that no one organisation or interest should prevail, and that each sector of the serials industry in whichever country they operate should recognise the over-riding need for agreement on common goals and priorities. This is only one aspect of the emergent global village, which in turn is the child of new information technology and the spirit of our times. It is that spirit which we hope will pervade the workings of the European Serials Conference, and encourage mutual understanding and fresh endeavours in the field of serials, which in the long run play such an important part in the advancement of human society.

International Co-operation on Serials

There is a natural limit to what any national organisation can do in the field of serials without becoming too bureaucratic. For some time it had been recognised in the UKSG that the role model on serial co-operation developed in Britain could be usefully employed in other countries. So it was that

in the early 80's considerable contacts were made with members of the American library profession as well as American commercial interests.

Of course these commercial interests had already played their part in the working of the UKSG, since serials is an international business, but they also had responsibilities in helping to set up a more structured system for the American serials industry. So it was that the North American counterpart of the UKSG, NASIG was set up. It soon began to set new standards for organisation and commitment. Later the Australian Serials Group emerged to encourage cross links on that continent.

Prospects for Serials Co-operation in Europe

It was perhaps inevitable that information workers on the mainland of Europe should become more interested in the possibility of setting up serials groups in their countries. Already librarians from different countries have been devotees of the UKSG conferences, while the serials publishing empires of Europe have been closely associated with the UKSG for some years.

In April of 1989 the idea of a European Serials conference was first mooted. One of its main purposes was seen as helping to crystallise individual countries desires to get more involved in serials co-operation. The first European Serials Conference takes place in the Netherlands between September 10th and 12th and it hoped that arriving out of it will be not only greater co-operation and contacts between representatives in future years, but that regional groups may well be set up on a formal basis in other parts of Europe. It is hoped that those who have already participated can lay their serials "experience" at the disposal of the new delegates and representatives. How individuals or organisations respond to the forthcoming conference is of course their concern, but at least the members of the UKSG will feel that they are continuing to fulfil their mission statement which is to promote co-operation and communication on serials.

Serials in Eastern Europe

Since the idea of the first European Serials Conference there have been dramatic changes in Eastern Europe which make the Netherlands conference even more timely. It has to be recognised that the problems of information transfer may be even more acute in Eastern Europe than in the West, and so it is pleasing to see that the programme already includes speakers and participants who will be able to put the Eastern European perspective. It may not be appreciated

widely enough that one of the relics of the cold war is an almost total ban on information technology transfer from West to East, thus impeding free communication on information, ideas and knowledge. For example, even to take a portable CD ROM player to the Soviet Union of not particularly high-tech calibre and bring it back again requires a special licence that has to be reviewed both by the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office. It may well be that those concerned with serials have a significant role to play in breaking down these kind of barriers to communication. At the same time the particular problems of Eastern Europe such as lack of hard currency, bureaucratic controls on travel, and relatively poor telecommunications must be recognised and addressed.

Future Challenges

If imbalances and lack of structures already impede the processes of information transfer this may be nothing compared to the future problems that may beset the serials industry. Price spiral effects have already been mentioned. At the moment it appears, at least in Britain, that the real cost of serials is increasing by 6 per cent per annum at a time when generally speaking library incomes are either static or falling. Then there is the problem of the new information products such as CD ROM which often place libraries in a technology trap where languages and equipment have to be continually updated in order to provide access to the latest information. Although we must recognise that in the last decade the balance of power within the information system has swung from consumers to producers and will probably continue to do so, nevertheless serial groups have an important role to play in bringing about the standardisation of information access that can only promote the efficient dispersion of knowledge. One of the main advantages of having national representative groups dealing with serial problems is that together they can tackle the problems of standardisation on an integrated basis. It is important that no one organisation or interest should prevail, and that each sector of the serials industry in whichever country they operate should recognise the over-riding need for agreement on common goals and priorities. This is only one aspect of the emergent global village, which in turn is the child of new information technology and the spirit of our times. It is that spirit which we hope will pervade the workings of the European Serials Conference, and encourage mutual understanding and fresh endeavours in the field of serials, which in the long run play such an important part in the advancement of human society. □