

Scholarly Communication & Serial Prices

SCONUL Conference 11th - 13th June, 1990, Chester.

Dr. Paul R. Green

Edward Boyle Library, Leeds University.

This conference, sponsored by SCONUL and the British Library Research and Development Department was attended by some 70 delegates, mostly from national and university libraries, but also including major publishers such as Elsevier and Springer and a subscription agent (Swets UK). In his opening remarks, Brian Burch, chairman of SCONUL stressed the need to find a solution to the problems of libraries trying to maintain comprehensive serials collections in view of the continuing growth of the serials literature, price rises way ahead of the retail price index and library budget increases well below rises in serial prices. He also felt that although academics regarded the serial as the primary vehicle of communication, it represented poor value for money - very few articles were ever read and the literature, particularly in Science and Technology depreciated very quickly. He hoped that the conference would address radical alternatives to the traditional serial.

In his keynote address, Professor Jack Meadows of Loughborough University outlined the different strategies adopted by publishers. Large publishers tended to adopt the "scatter gun" approach, publishing a large number of new titles in many different fields to see which survived; smaller publishers on the other hand tended to publish one or two titles in established fields. He also felt that although IT had made a significant contribution to the means of serial production, it had not done so to the end product, due largely to resistance from the

end users, ie the academics. They were still reluctant to publish in synoptic or electronic serials due to lack of prestige, prestige being all important for determining academic standing and hence promotion and winning research contracts. This theme of academic progression was taken up by professor Margaret Boden of Sussex University. There was an increasing pressure on academics to publish more and more and this pressure was likely to get worse, especially for younger staff, since

publication was likely to be increasingly linked to obtaining tenure.

In an analysis of the economics of serial publishing, Duane Webster of the Association of Research Libraries spoke of a situation in American libraries of "near crisis" and he lay the blame firmly at the door of commercial publishers for excessive profit margins. Two separate surveys had indicated profit margins at least 20% higher than what could reasonably be expected. He also saw worrying trends in the

market in that publishing was becoming concentrated in the hands of a few giant conglomerates who were using excessive profits to fund corporate takeovers.

Janet Garton, editor of the journal "Scandinavica" gave an interesting paper on how publishing costs had been kept low by removing it from the commercial sector and publishing it "in house" at the University of East Anglia. Disseminating knowledge was, she felt, a proper academic pursuit and university presses should be

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encouraged to increase their activities as they did in the early days of serial publishing.

Dr. Cliff McKnight of the HUSAT Research Institute of Loughborough University described a Project (BLEND) which had created an electronic journal (Computer Human Factors). The conclusion of the experiment was that although the journal was generally considered to have been a success, there were still considerable problems to be overcome, particularly with navigation around the file, making browsing very difficult. Graphics, colour plates etc were still problematic, as were lack of prestige and copyright. Solutions to these problems would have to be found by closely involving the end users if electronic journals were ever to become commercially viable.

Lynne Brindley of Aston University discussed the developments in IT which had taken place in the last 10 years and how far these had contributed to the development of the Electronic Library. The final formal papers of the conference on the

“politics of change” in serial publishing and scholarly communication were given by Bernard Naylor of Southampton University and again by Duane Webster of the Association of Research Libraries.

The conference concluded with a panel discussion for a programme for action and the main recommendations were:-

- (i) The development of an infrastructure for IT.
- (ii) Research into the development of a major electronic journal.
- (iii) Research on how people use journals and
- (iv) Improved data and statistics on serial pricing.

Subsequent to the conference, Bernard Naylor was asked to establish a working group to follow up major recommendations. UKSG were also looking at the data and statistics side; in particular, how data collection on serial prices might be improved. □

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