

Abstracting and Indexing Journals: The Unkindest Cut?

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Cutbacks to library budgets have been going on for as long as most librarians under the age of 45 can remember. They have become a seemingly inevitable and immutable part of life, one manifestation of which is the annual review of journal subscriptions - a distressing exercise in paring away flesh and bone from an already emaciated body which is nevertheless still required to function as an active working entity. Year after year, the serials librarian is faced with a range of difficult choices as s/he tries to balance costs and benefits to find the solution most acceptable to the greatest number. This subject at the expense of that? This long-standing subscription or a newcomer which looks as if it might cover more relevant ground? Journal X is essential and heavily used but cripplingly expensive: can we get away with only having one copy of it?

One choice posed is whether or not to cancel an abstracting and indexing (A&I) journal, perhaps in favour of retaining one or more primary journals. The librarian may see some very good reasons for this:

- A&I journals are - on the whole - more expensive than primary journals. If a blanket decision has been made to cut all subscriptions over a certain level, these are ready targets;
- the A&I journal may be relatively little used;
- new primary journals are being launched all the time, and the librarian may be under pressure from academics to make room for these. *Something* has to go;
- there may be two or more A&I services covering the same subject area. Why not just opt for the cheaper?
- the library already subscribes to or produces its own current awareness bulletin or lists of current contents. Surely these are adequate for keeping up to date in a subject?

All very good reasons - or are they? Let's have another look at them:

Cost

A&I journals don't come cheaply, and for good reason: the work that goes into producing them is highly labour intensive and a skilled professional job. On the other hand, percentage increases in the costs of A&I journals over the past couple of years have in general been substantially lower than for primary journals in the same period, and look what you get for your money: a key to articles in hundreds of the "core" primary journals in what might be a major subject or a range of disciplines, which few libraries could afford to buy in their entirety. With the emphasis increasingly on the provision of information not the collection of documentation, such keys are vital. Use them periodically as a performance measure to check out your own serials collections strengths and weaknesses: the inclusion of a particular journal in an A&I list is still a strong indicator of quality and relevance in a particular subject area.

Use

"Not enough people use it". Why not? Has anyone tried? Is the journal on open access or locked away? Is it - or other A&I journals - mentioned in the library's user guide? On induction visits, is your A&I section airily dismissed with a wave of the hand, thus ensuring that no new reader will ever bother to investigate further? What you don't know, you can't ask for or miss when it goes.

Competition for Funds from Primary Journals

The only competitors to new primary journals are other primary journals: A&I services fulfil a different function. If A&I journal X is cancelled, what substitute guides to the contents of serials literature for this subject area will you have left?

Competition From Another A & I Journal

Some ways of assessing a good A&I service are

given below, but the essential thing to consider is what you want the journal for. How do the two compare for accuracy and standard of abstracting? Coverage of American or foreign language material? What is important: breadth of coverage across a whole discipline, or depth in a few specific topics?

Current Awareness Bulletins

These are by nature ephemeral, meant for rapid scanning during the coffee break, quickly annotated and the article(s) tracked down immediately or not at all, since this information is notoriously difficult to retrieve later: no systematic indexes, no cumulations. An A&I journal, with its controlled vocabulary, makes it very much easier to do specific subject searches in (for example) a single quarterly issue, or over a year if required.

There are other factors which need taking into account when judging whether or not to axe your A&I sub.

Range of Formats Available

A&I services are produced in a wide diversity of formats. Most of the major ones can be bought in print (periodic issues with an annual volume or annual index), on-line (on perhaps a number of hosts) or available on CD-ROM. An SDI service might be offered, on or off-line. With such a choice available, use of the product can be tailored to the organisation's needs and budget without the loss of the title.

Abstracts

The presence of abstracts can save both time and money by helping to determine whether or not an article is worth seeking out, or obtaining from BLDSC. Whilst an abstract can never substitute for a relevant article, it can, if it is doing its job properly, enable a user rapidly to discard the unnecessary or irrelevant article which had such a promising title.

Tracking subject developments over time and across disciplines; identifying the major journals in a particular discipline; picking up articles from peripheral publications which might be unknown to or easily overlooked by a user: your A&I journal will enable you to do all these things. How do you know if the journal is a good one?

Some Factors in Assessing an A & I Journal

- What percentage of "core" journals are

covered? What is covered selectively? Where is the emphasis and how does this accord with your own?

- What proportion of titles are unique to this journal?
- Currency: how long does an article take to appear in the journal?
- Ease of use: does it use natural language terms? Is your search immediately rewarded or do you have to check through a number of likely headings?
- Does it have an Advisory Board? Who is on it?
- Breadth or depth of subject coverage (and which do you require?)
- Quality of indexing / abstracting
- How appropriate is the intellectual level for your needs?
- Coverage of non-UK or non-English language material (how important?)
- Who are its competitors, and how does it come out against them in terms of coverage, cost etc.?
- How do the publishers communicate with subscribers? (User Groups? A newsletter? Some other mechanism for giving and receiving feedback?)
- Does the coverage include collected works? conference proceedings ... ?
- Does it have a published thesaurus?

If, having assessed your threatened A&I journal and found it wanting in some respect or other, is there anything you can do about it short of cancellation? Yes, there is. Tell the publishers your need and ask if there are plans to enhance the publication by fulfilling it. We are always keen to receive constructive feedback on our publications and on ways in which the value of these to the customer can be added to. In some cases quite a small change, carried out at minimal cost to both sides, can result in considerable benefit to the user.

Publishers are not, on the whole and despite the bad press we get, unduly rapacious. To be so would surely be cutting off our noses to spite our faces, since declining subscriptions are continually forcing us to rethink our products, their content, and the way they are packaged. The key to happiness on both sides must be communication: let your A&I publisher know of your needs, and they will certainly listen, and very possibly act. So before you bin that renewal reminder, think: isn't it worth a phone call? □