

International Co-operation Serials: The Role of a National Body

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It is strange to contemplate that only a few short years ago - the early 1970's - independent, special interest groups, such as the UK Serials Group, did not exist. There were, of course, special interest groups attached to the (UK) Library Association (although no serials group!) as well as to other national and international professional organisations; but as far as independent groups ... there were none.

However, in the mid-1970's significant changes were to take place. John Merriman from Blackwell's Periodicals had, for some time, been concerned about the lack of communication within the serials industry and in 1975 he decided to put his concern into practice. John was the leading force behind the organisation of the first Blackwells Periodical Conference in Oxford in 1975, and out of this was formed a Steering Group which included many now familiar names: David Wood - then Head of Acquisitions (and now Deputy Director) at the Document Supply Centre at Boston Spa, which houses one of the largest and most important collection of serials in the world; David Woodworth - a library school lecturer who had been concerned for some time about the lack of attention to serials in library school education; and John Urquhart, who continues to play the role of "ideas" man on the Committee. From this Steering Group grew the UK Serials Group which made one of its main aims to bring together people from all facets of the industry: people concerned with common problems from different perspectives.

From its earliest conception UKSG took the decision to be independent and not to ally itself to any other existing organisation. Such a status gave the Group a level of independence and freedom from traditional viewpoints and enabled it to take decisions in the best interests of its diverse constituency of members. Today, the committee comprises a good balance of librarians, publishers and subscription agents; all Officers and Committee members are elected on an annual basis at an AGM, held during the annual conference in April. Although there is no permanent Secretariat, the Group relies heavily on the services of a part time Administrator - currently Jill Tolson. All other Committee work is conducted on a voluntary basis.

The Committee has always attempted to keep membership fees at a modest level; at present membership covers the cost of the annual subscription to the journal "Serials" and offers reduced rates at conferences, courses and seminars. Such an approach is consistent with the Group's policy of providing maximum service at minimum cost.

In its early years of existence, the main activity of the Group centred around the annual conference. At this time, it must be remembered, serials were the Cinderella of librarianship and received scant attention from other professional bodies and in the professional literature. Even now familiar journals such as "The Serials Librarian" and "Serials Review" were very much in their infancy, starting publication in 1976 and 1975 respectively. The early conferences took a particular theme each year, with titles such "Financing serials from the producer to the user" (1979); "Automation and Serials" (1980); and "Resource sharing: its impact upon serials" (1981). It is probably true to say that during the first few conferences, there was also a "hidden agenda" which inevitably resurfaced at each meeting. This hidden agenda encompassed a certain degree of hostility between librarians and publishers over the subject of serial pricing - librarians being of the firm opinion that the high increases in the cost of journal subscriptions were solely related to the publishers relentless grasp for profit. Of course, the problem of escalating serial costs has not disappeared - it is one with which we are still battling. But it is probably true to say that a good deal of the hostility has been dissipated, as both sides begin to appreciate the complexities of the argument from different vantage points.

Although the annual conference is still the main focus of the UKSG calendar, inevitably as the Group has grown, it has undertaken a far wider range of activities in the achievement of its objectives and in the service of its members. One important feature is its role in education and training, and the Committee now elects an Education Officer and an Education Subcommittee whose job it is to plan a variety of courses - some with the needs of the membership as a whole in mind, and some targeted at specific groups within

the membership. Examples include a regular one-day course on "Serials Management and Administration" aimed at library assistants and recently qualified librarians. The course aims to provide a solid background of information on collection management issues such as selection and de-selection, binding, financial administration and staff organisation, as well as providing a platform for a subscription agent to explain and discuss his or her role in serials management. A session on serials automation offers the delegates an opportunity to learn about selection and implementation of systems and to contrast and compare different serials modules.

Another successful seminar "Subscription agencies: into the 1990's" attracted delegates not only from subscription agencies but also from libraries and publishing companies. This seminar examined the effects of increasing automation within the industry; the future of traditional printed journals and the changing publisher, agent, library relationship.

The Group has not simply confined its interests to traditional printed serials. Over the past two years, CD-ROMs have emerged as an important and fast growing format for serials publications. Because of the keen interest in CD-ROM and CD-ROM technology, last year the Group organised a highly successful two-day seminar on CD-ROM in York, at which some one hundred delegates attended. A forthcoming seminar which has already generated a good deal of interest will be targeted specifically at members in the publishing field. Located in a large academic library, it will provide an opportunity to view a working serials collection and hear a number of presentations from senior librarians on library funding issues, budget preparation and perhaps most interestingly - how and why libraries select journals.

Cooperation with other professional groups and organisations has also become a feature of UKSG activities, and a number of joint initiatives have been arranged with organisations such as the British Library Document Supply Centre, the MARC Users Group (MUG) and the National Acquisitions Group (NAG). These joint cooperative ventures have usually taken the form of seminars, but a rather different departure was the joint organisation of an exhibition of automated library systems - specifically featuring serial and book acquisition systems. This was very favourably received by system vendors and visitors alike, and because of the considerable interest in the subject of automation and the rapid changes and developments which are taking place in systems, it is intended to repeat the exhibition some time in the future.

One important area of concern within the Group, where limited impact has been made to-date, is in the area of library school training. It is still an unfortunate fact of life that serials do not feature within the majority of UK library school syllabuses. Considering the amount of time that is spent in libraries (particularly academic and industrial libraries) managing a serials collection, and more importantly, the proportion of the budget which is spent on serials (in university libraries, well over half the acquisitions budget) this seems an extraordinary state of affairs. In order to rectify the situation to some small degree, the Group has devised two strategies for increasing its profile within library schools and among library school students. For a number of years the Group has offered partially and fully sponsored places at its Annual Conference. Up to six student places are available, and those students who have taken advantage of the scheme have been very complimentary about the organisation of the conference, its content and welcome they have received. A further ambition in this area is to increase the number of library schools who send students, as in previous years it has tended to concentrate on just a small nucleus of schools. The second prong of the attack upon library schools is the recently instituted "Travelling Workshops". These workshops visit library schools throughout the country, offering a series of presentations from a publisher, a practising serials librarian and a subscription agent. Visits to date have been well received, by both staff and students, and have provided a lively forum for the exchange of information. Over the next 12 month period the "Travelling Workshop" will run in six further library schools.

Professional organisations are typically expected to have an active publishing schedule. The major UKSG publication is its journal "Serials" which is published three times a year. As with many organisations the journal had its roots in a Newsletter which gradually extended its coverage to include not only news items and brief communications on serials related issues, but to also include full length articles. The Newsletter was complemented by the separate publication of the Proceedings of the Annual Conference. As members of our profession are well aware, publication of conference proceedings is a time consuming and laborious process - late submission of papers being the prime culprit - and many conference proceedings do not see the light of day for some nine to twelve months after the conference has taken place: UKSG Proceedings being no exception! Therefore in 1987, the Committee took the decision to amalgamate the Newsletter and the

Conference Proceeding into one publication - a new journal entitled simply "Serials". Most of the conference papers from the April conference are distributed between the July and December issues, thus making them available to the information world in a much shorter period of time than was previously possible - a very important consideration.

Having taken the decision to concentrate publishing output in the form of one single journal, the question of publishing other types of monograph material was debated. Taking advice from members in the publishing industry it was decided that future publication of occasional monographs would only be entered into in conjunction with other larger, professional publishers. Thus currently there are two publications where UKSG is a joint publisher: the first is the bibliographical work "Current British Journals" which is published with the Document Supply Centre, and the second is "Serials Management: A Practical Handbook", a joint publication with ASLIB, due for publication in October 1990.

Clearly the UKSG - as a national serials group - has greatly expanded and developed its role over the last fifteen years. Its wide representation of the serials industry and the breadth of its activities bear witness to the important role which it has established in the information world. In conclusion it may be useful to outline some of the challenges which need to be addressed in the future. Earlier in the Conference the rationale which encouraged the Group to spread its wings into Europe was explained - the main impetus being the growing, and increasingly articulated desire by mainland Europeans, to participate and contribute to the work of the UKSG. The establishing of regional serials groups within Europe has been discussed by serials activists in a number of countries, and the Committee is looking forward with anticipation to the reporting back sessions from the Regional Workshops at the end of the conference. Thus, further connections and cooperation with Europe would seem to be a possible future scenario for the Group.

There are many other issues with which the group is likely to concern itself with in the short and medium-term future. Serial prices continue to be a major concern and increasingly both librarians and scholars are looking towards alternative forms of scholarly communication. One idea which is currently receiving attention is the possibility of academic institutions themselves becoming far more involved in the dissemination of information emanating from academic research. A further indicator of this trend is that the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) - a

powerful and influential force in academia is expressing considerable enthusiasm for research into an electronic journal. Although it is unlikely that we will see the demise of the printed journal during this decade, nevertheless it is clear that radical changes in the pattern of scholarly communication will evolve through new developments in information technology.

Because of the international nature of serial publishing, standardisation is another area where national and international cooperation can help to solve problems on an integrated basis. One small, but practical topic which the Group will be addressing in early 1991 is the standardization of journal covers and the physical layout of journal contents. In addition, wherever possible, we will be contributing our combined knowledge and expertise to standards relating to both printed journals and new information products.

In conclusion, a quote from a recent article by John Urquhart (1) seems appropriate:

"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 overriding 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 the 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". □

References

- (1) Urquhart, John. The role of serials in the modern world. *Serials* 3 (2), 1990