Serials Databases and Networks in the United Kingdom

THE United Kingdom does not have a single, large database of serial records with explicit locations and holdings. But this was not always so if the **British Union Catalogue of Periodicals** (BUCOP) is regarded as a database (using that term in its widest sense). The four substantial volumes of BUCOP were published during 1955-58, followed by a supplement up to 1960 in two further substantial volumes. The main work contains more than 140,000 titles with holdings reported from 440 libraries. It was a considerable enterprise for its time given that it was manually compiled and produced by conventional printing methods.

The National Libraries ADP Study concluded in its report, **The Scope for Automatic Data Processing in the British Library**, in 1972, that only 70% of holdings and locations in BUCOP were, by then, accurate and, presumably, that level of accuracy must, by now, be somewhat lower. Nevertheless, it is still a useful source of information much prized, for example, by the public service staff in the British Library, who keenly feel the lack of a national listing, or at least a comprehensive British Library listing.

BUCOP was continued by **BUCOP. New Periodical Titles** (BUCOP.NPT) with its subset **The World List of Scientific Periodicals**, the last separate edition of which, the fourth, was published in three volumes in 1963-65. The number of libraries reporting their holdings to BUCOP.NPT steadily declined over the years and the number of new titles that the very small editorial team could reasonably cope with was limited. The quarterly issues were annually cumulated and there were two larger cumulations, 1960-1968 in 1970 and 1969-1973 in 1976. Thereafter resources were not available to produce further larger cumulations.

The National Libraries ADP Study argued the case for a single, complete, machine-readable file

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of the serial titles, with holdings, held by all the constituent parts of the newly established British Library; but it was considered, after further examination within the Library during the 1970s, to be more technically complex, more costly and more time consuming than originally thought.

A proposal to close down BUCOP.NPT met with some concern within the UK library community, sufficient to cause the Library to rethink. Eventually the last annual cumulation of BUCOP.NPT was published in 1980, to be replaced the following year by **Serials in the British Library** (SBL).

It was intended that SBL, a quarterly printed listing with a rolling annual cumulation on microfiche, should include not only all serial titles newly acquired by the Library, with holdings and locations information, but also those newly acquired by twenty other major libraries, including the other copyright libraries in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Continuing downward pressures on resources within the Library eroded that intention. By 1987 coverage was restricted to those titles acquired for the London-based collections, albeit with newly introduced keyword access. More recently a microfiche cumulation, **Serials in the British Library, 1976-1986**, comprising records of over 57,000 titles acquired by the London collections in those years, was published. This cumulation is derived from three MARC files: BNBMARC and the current catalogues of the Humanities and Social Sciences division (H&SS) and the Science Reference and Information Service (SRIS). (*H&SS throughout this article will refer to the former division of that name, not the present directorate.*)

It might be concluded from the foregoing that there is either an indifference on the part of the UK library community to the need for a comprehensive national serials database or a mute acceptance by that community of the inevitabilities of economic reality. That may well be true; but there is, and has been for some little while, a perceived need for a national bibliographic database. While the technical means are there to create such a database, the economic means are not so readily available.

Several years ago an attempt to establish a UK Library Database System foundered for lack of adequate funds and for lack of political will on the part of the potential participants. There were, and there are, the problems of copyright in records, royalties and licensing agreements, with potential major participants in any system having the need to protect their intellectual property, payment for the use of which helps to keep them in being as bibliographic utilities, and as such they are in competition in a limited market.

National Data Resource

Attention has now turned to the more generalized concept of a national data *resource* as opposed to a national *database*. That concept implies reasonably easy access to databases, with the ability to download and upload, through a national network. The Library is connected into the UK universities' Joint Academic Network (JANET) which, widening its membership to include the polytechnics, has an as yet unrealised potential for collaborative programmes and projects with academic libraries of all kinds. But this wider concept of a national data resource accessible through a national network is still at the early discussion stage.

While lacking a comprehensive national database of records and holdings of serial titles, nevertheless there is an array of unco-ordinated bibliographic resources. There are the databases of the bibliographic utilities, such as BLCMP, SLS and SCOLCAP, and, though not a bibliographic utility,

the London and South Eastern Regional Library Bureau (LASER). There are the catalogues and lists of certain major libraries and library groupings, for example, University of Cambridge and the University of London. And there are a number of catalogues and listings covering particular geographical areas and particular disciplines. Most of these catalogues and lists are in printed or microfiche form and often are updated only at irregular intervals.

The British Library

The single, largest resource of serial holdings in the United Kingdom is, of course, the British Library. The Library is estimated to have holdings of over 520,000 serial titles, of which about 182,000 are current. There is some overlap within the London collections and between the London collections and that at the Document Supply Centre, but even taking that overlap into account, there is still, by any standard, a considerable collection of serials.

There is, unfortunately, no single listing or database of the Library's serial holdings. The reason for this is that the Library, as a corporate entity, is still quite young, having been established only as recently as 1973. Its disparate constituents have different traditions and have catalogues compiled according to different bibliographic conventions over a widely varying number of years. Many serial titles are held in general files which include both serials and monographs, such as the **British Library Catalogue** (BLC) (essentially the catalogue of the former Department of Printed Books of the British Museum Library) and its successor the current catalogue of H&SS, the current catalogue of SRIS, and BNBMARC. There are, in H&SS, a number of other smaller files, some machine-readable, some not, including the catalogue of the Newspaper Library (with about 40,000 records).

The current catalogue of the latter has recently become available in the reading room at Colindale in machine-readable form, and plans are well advanced for conversion of the retrospective file

over the next few years. At the Document Supply Centre, its holdings are available together with those of H&SS, SRIS, the University of Cambridge Library and the Science Museum, and are available on microfiche as **Keyword Index to Serial Titles** (KIST) and on CD-ROM as **Boston Spa Serials**, which each contain about 440,000 records.

The task of bringing together the Library's disparate files is a daunting one. The reality of an integrated listing of H&SS holdings is dependent on the conversion of the BLC, now complete, and the conversion of the Newspaper Library catalogue. The implications of an integrated listing for H&SS, and even more so for the Library as a whole, are considerable, and in the present state of the Library's resources it will probably not have a high priority. When the Library's OPAC is fully developed and in op-eration and its major files not yet converted are converted, it may well be that the need for an integrated listing within the Library may be considerably diminished. But that does not take full account of needs outside the Library.

At a workshop on serials held at the MARC Users Group conference in 1988, it was apparent that the lack of a substantial national database of serial records was keenly felt. It was not so much the need for catalogue records for use in derived cataloguing but for interlending purposes. The need to know which library held what, not only for inter-library loan but also for consultation and collection development, was considered to be of primary importance.

It has to be said that, in spite of that, there is little evidence of clamour within the UK for either a British Library integrated file or for a major British database. The imperative for a national union catalogue of serials in the UK is removed to a considerable extent by the existence of its highly developed system of interlibrary lending, the efficient and effective services of the British Library Document Supply Centre and the growth of the bibliographic utilities. Lacking a major one-stop database of serial titles does mean that locating what you want may not always be as quick as you would like and may call for the exercise of some skill and patience. Undoubtedly a major step forward in overcoming problems will be the conversion of certain British Library files into machine-readable form and access to those files and the files of other major collections and the bibliographic utilities through a national bibliographic network. In the meantime libraries must continue to do their pragmatic best with the rich and varied resources which exist in the United Kingdom. ❑