

# The Work of Subscription Agents

This paper endeavours to cover the work of subscription agents in general, but with particular emphasis on the services offered by the members of the Association of Subscription Agents.

The generic term for the publications supplied through subscription agents is serials. These may also be known as journals, periodicals, magazines and series.

A serial may be published on a regular basis e.g. weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually, etc., or at irregular intervals.

Although most serials continue indefinitely, some have a limited lifespan.

In addition many agents supply monographic series which are either shipped direct by the publishers, or handled through the agent. These publications are often invoiced at the time of supply of each volume, unlike subscriptions to journals which are charged annually in advance and usually posted direct by the publisher.

There has always been a danger of over simplifying the process of acquisition and supply. The library user's view is quite straightforward. You order a year's subscription. You pay the supplier's bill, and there is nothing to do except check in the copies as they arrive a few days after publication. There is often a similar view in the publishers' offices. It is regarded as a simple clerical operation, suitable for low grade staff. It does not matter if arbitrary decisions are made about the format, title, extra volumes, etc. Worst of all, because it is a simple clerical operation, when a computer package comes along they adopt it, often with disastrous results.

However, in the last few years, publishers and agents have increasingly shared their experiences, and the position has greatly improved.

The growth in the number of periodicals published is shown by the following figures taken from *Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory*.

**John Merriman**  
Secretary, Association of  
Subscription Agents

In 1972 it listed 50,000 periodicals and 20,000 serials. The 30th edition, 1991-92 lists over 118,500 titles, with 696 subject headings.

The sixth, 1992 edition of *The Serials Directory* published by EBSCO lists 140,000 titles (including newspapers). There are 10,000 new entries, and 80,000 revised titles.

The most comprehensive record of serials past and present is maintained by the ISDS (International Serials Data System) in Paris. This is the organisation responsible for issuing the ISSN (International Standard Serials Number) for serials published in all parts of the world.

Access to the records has recently become available on *ISSN Compact – the ISDS Register on CD-ROM* including the list of Serials Title Word Abbreviations. This is described as the authoritative world catalogue for serial identification with more than 600,000 entries from 193 countries in 144 languages. There are over 40,000 new entries and 60,000 updates per year.

So it seems, in spite of economic constraints in libraries, the number of serials continues to increase. To obtain even a small percentage of these, what are the librarian's options?

- a) To order direct. In fact some publishers actively encourage this.
- b) To centralise through one large subscription agent like Blackwell's, Dawson's, EBSCO, Faxon, Readmore, Swets, etc. From these there would be additional advantages from the value added services they can offer.
- c) To order domestic journals through a domestic dealer and overseas journals from an overseas dealer, or even by agents in country of origin.

- d) To order periodicals through a subscription agent and irregulars and book serials through a bookseller.
- e) To choose an agent/bookseller who offers a complete service for all publications.

Subscription agents have been around for a good many years. The oldest is W.H. Everett and Son Ltd., founded in 1793. In 1809 Dawsons were delivering journals by stage coach and Faxon proudly state that they were giving a continual service to libraries since 1881. The 1986 ALA Survey of International Subscription Agents lists 319 firms of which 157 (49%) offered a world-wide procurement service, although it is now out of date, a new edition is rumoured. It is likely the only changes will be a reduction in the number of agents. Why?

1. It is a highly specialised job and, if it is to be done well, requires heavy investment in computer technology and skilled staff.
2. It is interesting that as far as I am aware no bright young people are seeking to make their fortunes by opening new agencies.
3. The large established agents are getting bigger and swallowing up the smaller ones.
4. There must be a high volume of business to cover operating costs from publishers' generally wafer thin discounts.

Most of the large agents belong to the Association of Subscription Agents. Its aims and objectives are:

1. To set and maintain standards of service.
2. To improve publisher/agent relations.
3. To take up cudgels where agents' and subscribers' interests are threatened, i.e. imposition of VAT, increased postage rates, etc.

4. To maintain friendly competition between each other.
5. To invite publishers to meetings to discuss and resolve mutual problems.

A list of the members is available from the Secretary.

### Why use an Agent

While this paper is slanted towards the supply of serials to libraries, it should not be forgotten that some members of the Association of Subscription Agents encourage orders from individual subscribers as well as institutions. They may also specialise in certain subjects such as the Biological Sciences for example and act as distributors for publishers in their particular field.

The supply of periodicals relies on mutual trust between the purchaser, agent and publisher, and it usually works very well. Large sums of money change hands before any goods are received, which is quite contrary to normal commercial practice. Most agents do not see the titles they are selling because they are posted direct to subscribers (apart from those agents who offer consolidation). It is a gigantic operation and without integrity and mutual confidence the system fails.

The agent can easily be sabotaged by an inefficient or indifferent publisher. In these days of economic difficulties, it is of course very important that the agent is financially sound and has adequate resources to run the business. The agent forms a vital link in the information chain of author, publisher, librarian and reader. We all like a quiet life with the minimum of trouble and by providing an efficient service we hope to achieve this.

Even with a service charge, it should still be economic for the librarian to use an agent, particularly if benefits are being offered from automation. Although agents may be unable to offer discount as such, a number do make it possible for the librarian

to deposit money in advance and benefit from the interest that this earns. This is a useful scheme as many librarians are not allowed to invest through the normal channels themselves.

Publishers, unfortunately, do not operate to consistent criteria-policies, service standards and staff are constantly changing. The agent should be the expert who relieves the library of a large administrative load by providing a convenient and reliable method of procuring journals from all parts of the world.

A good analogy is the travel agent:

1. Who knows the ropes.
2. Maintains accurate up-to-date information.
3. Knows all about currencies.
4. Saves time, worry and trouble.

The good subscription agent will be offering many or all of the following:

1. Maintain good and easily accessible records with common expiry dates, wherever possible.
2. Maintain up-to-date prices and journal information, backed up by a comprehensive collection of reference sources for tracing out-of-the-way titles.
3. Process and order efficiently new subscriptions from the many thousands of possible suppliers.
4. Avoid breaks in the supply by renewing in good time.
5. Offer a choice of whether subscriptions are handled on a one year only, or standing order basis.
6. Produce accurate invoices, observing the customer's special requirements which is something the publishers will not be able to do for libraries who deal direct. An increasing number of libraries now require machine readable invoices.

7. Respond effectively to claims for missing issues and other queries. Provide advance information about delays in publication, title changes, etc.
8. Produce catalogues and price quotations.
9. Arrange for specimen copies to be sent.
10. Pay publishers promptly to avoid breaks in the supply, and be able to pay in the various currencies of the world.
11. Provide one source of information and build up a good personal relationship with the librarian.
12. Reduce the library's overheads by taking on much of the workload.
13. Establish good relationships with the publishers and become familiar with their individual working methods.
14. Aid the library as much as possible with budgeting and financial management – offer credit terms, and a prepayment plan which allows librarians to make the best use of their funds in a time of declining budgets.
15. Provide management reports which help the librarian to manage the collection. Examples are:
  - Three year price comparison giving the amount and percentage of increase in price.
  - Subject lists which show how much is spent in each subject area.
  - Country of origin – showing what geographical areas a library is buying from.
  - Bibliographical holding lists – publisher, frequency, title changes etc.
  - Complete holdings lists indicating status of publication – delayed titles, temporarily suspended, etc.
  - Publisher lists – all titles published by a particular publisher.
  - Union listing.

- Foreign language lists.
  - Claims limits lists.
16. Provide serial control systems, and electronic message switching services and online enquiry facilities.
  17. Back issues, microform and CD-ROM services.

### The Agent and the Publisher

The common aim must be the right journal to the right reader at the right time at the right price. The need for specialised knowledge is well illustrated by the various rules different publishers have for starting new subscriptions. They can be:

Calendar year only.

Volume only – not necessarily by the calendar year.

To begin with the current issue after the order is received.

To begin with the next issue after the order is received.

To start from the date the payment is received.

To require a special classification form to be completed.

To be available on controlled circulation.

To be available free of charge to qualified subscribers.

Once a subscription has been ordered various things can happen to a title. It can:

Merge.

Start to issue supplements.

Suspend publication.

Change format.

Produce indexes.

Change frequency.

Change numbering.

Double the price.

Go on controlled circulation.

Go bankrupt.

Cease.

Become available for casual sales on news stands only.

Any library with a substantial number of subscriptions probably orders well over 70% through agents. The remainder are received free, on exchange, or must be purchased direct.

While standards of service are still a very important yardstick, it would be naive to assume that prices and service charges are still a low priority in librarians' minds. This is why agents' terms with publishers are of such vital importance and why the steady erosion of discounts is causing us so much concern. Certainly agents are not growing fat at the expense of either librarians or publishers. It is a very real blow when a publisher cuts discount, particularly if it involves a large number of primary journals.

Inevitably, every time a publisher reduces or abolishes discount (and many now only give a miserly 5%) the average margin is eroded a little bit more, the agent's mark up increases and so do the library's costs. The ultimate and quite unthinkable end to this process of atrophy is no discount at all and minimum service charges of 10%. To cut agents' discount as a short term expedient to hold down prices can appear virtuous. However, the so called "benefit" only lasts one year after which the normal effects of inflation have to be faced. It also has no beneficial effect on the majority of libraries who order through agents, who will have received an additional service charge to compensate for the loss of discount.

It should be clearly understood that there is no such thing as the Net Book Agreement operating for periodicals, and agents are free to charge any price they wish. The great regulating factor is that they are all in competition with each other. The terms given by periodical publishers are very small when compared with books and indeed other trades. Most agents would probably hope to achieve an overall gross profit of round about 10% to 12% but we know that world-wide publishers discount averages out at 7%. The agent is bound to make a service charge. Librarians should beware of agents

who make extravagant discount offers which vary widely from the norm. They may be marking up the publishers' price, cutting corners on service, or making a loss on the first year just to obtain business. The bid system can produce horrific results for the unfortunate librarian who is forced to accept the lowest tender. Frequent change of agent is also bad from the point of view of the publishers.

Practice varies but generally there are two methods for calculating prices. One is to look at each title to see what discount is allowed and if need be to adjust the price by adding a percentage. Obviously this percentage is scaled down the more expensive the journal becomes. The second method, much favoured by American agencies, is to list all journals at the prices announced by the publishers, and then to add an overall service charge at the end of the invoice.

What factors does the agent use when deciding a pricing policy?

Gross profit in the last five years.

Net profit in the last five years.

Inflation predictions.

Overseas currency exchange rate predictions and fluctuations.

Actual publishers' discount.

Average length of credit taken by customers.

Overheads.

Competitors terms.

High cost of obtaining journals from some countries.

Can the agent help the publisher, or is it really one way only, i.e. just for the benefit of the librarian? Most publishers agree that the 80-20 rule applies and most of their business is with quite a small number of major agents who are reasonably efficient and can offer the following benefits:

1. One reliable source for a large number of subscriptions, together with financial stability.

2. Personal contact. A good relationship can be developed between the people doing the day to day work.
3. Prompt placement of new orders and renewals. No delays or uncertainty about payment, which enables the publisher to plan his cash flow with confidence. It is not necessary to send out a renewal reminder, unless the subscription has lapsed.
4. The agent takes the credit risk. Quite stable countries can crumble as a result of revolution or economic difficulties. Large sums of money may be owed to the agents who can suffer heavy losses. The publishers are cushioned by the agents.
5. Maintain accurate and up-to-date records which can be of real assistance if something goes wrong in the publisher's office.
6. Comprehensive renewal checklists are sent to the libraries. These encourage speedy renewal and dispense with the need for publishers' reminders.
7. Renewals and orders bulked up in an easily processable form and covered by one cheque. Publishers unique subscription numbers can be quoted to aid processing.
8. Publicity — this can take various forms from a simple entry in a catalogue to special mailings of brochures.
9. Dissemination of information. Most agents have a regular reporting service, and it is easy for a publisher to make use of this to announce new journals, title changes, cumulative indices, supplements, delays in publication, etc. Where claims are concerned, preventative medicine can save time and money. For example, misnumbering. All subscribers are informed and unnecessary claims are avoided. Returning the agents claim form with the reply saves writing a letter.

10. Joint consultation on automation projects. Systems designed in isolation have often proved costly disasters. Many agents use advanced computer technology and are more than willing to share their experience with publishers embarking on a similar course. I am glad to say more and more publishers are seeking the advice and help of agents.

The benefits derived from machine readable codes and online systems are one of the strongest arguments in favour of agents. The work is very seasonal, and backlogs commonplace at the end of the year. The elimination of paper means fast processing and a high degree of accuracy with the minimum of clerical effort. Orders can be sent at pre-arranged times, and in a format most suited to individual publishers requirements. The system can also be used for claims, reports on claims, new title information, price changes, supplementary volumes, etc. I.C.E.D.I.S. (International Committee on Electronic Data Interchange for Serials) consisting of six publishers and six subscriptions agents is busy establishing international standards for the fast and efficient exchange of information by electronic means. This will lead to a vastly improved service for librarians.

11. Back issue services help publishers sell their back stocks, which become increasingly expensive to store. Through catalogues and special mailings, agents actively promote sales.

Publishers organisations in the UK with whom the ASA wish to maintain a friendly and constructive relationship are the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP), Periodical Publishers Association and the Publishers Association – Serials Executive.

## The Agent and the Librarian

### The Journal Records

Keeping track of journal changes is a full-time job. There is a steady flow of information throughout the year, with a peak in the Summer when letters are sent out asking publishers for their new prices for the following year. The replies to these letters flow in over a period of six months or more. Ideally publishers should respond before 31 August, in order that the main renewal invoices contain up-to-date prices, and additional charges at a later date are avoided. Many agents notify any price changes which are considered to be excessive. The agent's title database is the main bibliographical tool. It is backed up by a comprehensive collection of reference sources.

### The Customer Records

This contains full details of each customer and their special requirements, and new orders are checked against this to ensure the records are up-to-date and accurate.

### The Subscription Records

This holds full details about each subscription, including title, period covered, amount charged and date of invoice, customer order number and date, etc.

### New Orders

The following requirements should be clearly stated:

1. Address to which copies are to be sent.
2. Address for invoices, if it is different.
3. Order number and date.
4. Clear instructions when to start. Unless the agent is told otherwise, it is usual to go back to the beginning of the current volume. As the year proceeds this becomes increasingly difficult as the early issues tend to go out of print. It has to be decided whether to supply from the first available issue, or wait until the following year. Some general guidelines on what is preferred is helpful.

5. State whether until forbidden or one year only.
6. Should the agent take advantage of multi-year rates when these are available?
7. Is it an existing subscription formerly obtained through another source?

### Renewals

In general reminders and invoices sent direct by the publishers may be thrown away, unless they are final demands, in which case they should be forwarded to the agent to check. It could be that a payment has not been correctly recorded by the publisher.

Other exceptions are:

1. When a unique publisher subscription reference must be quoted.
2. If the expiration date is different.
3. If there are special early renewal savings (forward with request to process and bill early).
4. If there is a special rate.

Agents operate two systems:

1. Standing orders (until forbid). The subscriptions are automatically renewed each year unless cancellation instructions are received. As soon as the main annual renewal invoice or checklist is received it is important to notify the agent of any cancellations. Once the renewal cycle is underway and the publishers have been paid, it is often difficult to obtain a refund for a cancellation. Any library supplied on a standing order basis with problems of budget cuts, or lack of foreign exchange, should ask the agent to put a 'stop' on all renewals until the position becomes clear.
2. One year only. A reminder list is sent out in the Summer and the subscriptions will not be renewed until specific instructions are received from the library. It is important to send renewal instructions as soon as possible, certainly by the end of October, otherwise there is a risk of breaks in the supply.

### Claims for Missing Issues

These are a major headache for librarians, agents and publishers. In an imperfect world this problem will never be solved completely but we do hope to alleviate it. It is a major source of complaint from librarians. The agent can help by offering a speedy claims service, backed up by regular progress reports. Many agents issue their own pre-printed claims forms to their customers free of charge. There can be no set formula for when, and when not, to claim. The best guide is the receipt pattern. What is important is that claims should be done on a regular basis, as many publishers have a time limit during which they will replace free of charge. The following claiming schedule may be used as a very general guide, making due allowance for country of origin:

Dailies	–	claim after ten days from receipt of last issue.
Weeklies	–	claim after two weeks from receipt of last issue.
Monthlies	–	claim after two months from receipt of last issue.
Quarterlies	–	claim after five months from receipt of last issue.

There are a number of reasons for claims:

1. The customer's original instructions were misleading.
2. The agent has made a mistake.
3. Inefficiencies in the publishers office, e.g. failure to process payments correctly.
4. Breakdown in postal services.
5. Strikes and industrial disputes.
6. Revolutions and wars.
7. Underprinting.
8. Inefficient checking-in in the library, failure to record change of title, etc.
9. Poorly designed automated serials control systems in libraries which generate premature or invalid claims.
10. Multi-year subscriptions cut off after first year. This is quite a common problem.

11. Problems over multiple copies. It seems very difficult for a publisher to correctly register a second, third, etc. subscription.
12. Incorrect address plates.
13. Insufficient wrapping.
14. Use of inefficient so called 'fulfilment' agencies.

The publishers maintain that a high proportion of missing issues arrive or are subsequently found, and for this reason some of them automatically reject first claims if, from their records, it appears that the copy was correctly sent. Others require proof of payment before they will deal with the claim. This is one of the reasons why agents discourage claiming direct. Increasingly publishers are providing agents with up-to-date publication status reports. These enable the agent to trap premature claims and immediately report back to the librarian. The extension of a subscription to compensate for missing issues is a poor substitute for the issues themselves, and is not liked by librarians. If it is a particularly important journal most agents will try and get a second-hand copy, although this is often a lengthy business.

### **Duplicate Copies**

The most common cause of duplication is premature claiming. The delayed copy can arrive after the claim has been sent. The original copy can thus be followed a few weeks later by the replacement.

The agent should be informed if continuous duplication takes place. It is most helpful to include the address labels from both wrappers as these aid the publisher in tracing the error. Duplicate copies should not be returned unless requested to do so.

### **Cancellations**

The best way to cancel is to allow the subscription to lapse. Once a subscription is underway it is rather like stopping a super tanker — it can be done but you need plenty

of warning. If however, a librarian has a good reason for cancelling mid-term, most agents will attempt to obtain a refund for the unexpired portion of the subscription, but the agent cannot refund unless a refund has been received from the publisher.

The renewal cycle starts up in September. Again, it is important if a library has a standing order for the supply of journals, and there is the possibility of substantial cancellations because of budget cuts, etc., the agent should be warned not later than the end of September, when a 'stop' can be put on all the renewals until the position becomes clear.

### **Automation**

For some years the world's leading subscription agents have invested heavily to computerise their in-house routines. It is logical that the next step is for these databases to be available to their customers by on-line link-ups like EBSCO's EBSCONET, Data Swets and Blackwell's CONNECT. In addition, there are the distributed processing systems for the complete management of serials within the library. Already well-known systems are Blackwell's ISIS, Dawson's OASIS, Faxon LINX & Swets SAILS.

### **Invoicing and Delays in Payment**

It is standard practice for the agent to pay the publisher in advance. In fact, most publishers demand this. It follows that the agent expects prompt payment of invoices, otherwise it is necessary to borrow money to finance the renewals.

Particular problems arise in countries where there are difficulties over obtaining foreign exchange. Agents who allowed credit found themselves waiting for up to a year, or more, before payment was received. Taking into account the cost of borrowing, plus the low discount given by publishers, it was obvious that in these circumstances nearly all the profit on an order is wiped out.

Therefore, most agents now send proforma

invoices to libraries who are unable to pay promptly. No subscriptions are renewed until payment is received. If it is not received until well into the new subscription year a very severe problem arises, because in many cases the publishers are unable to backdate the subscriptions, or the early issues are out of print.

When the payment is received from July onwards, it is advisable not to attempt to renew the subscriptions but to use the money the following year. Eventually the issues for the year that has been missed have to be obtained from a back issue dealer.

### **Periodicals Price Index**

As far as I know there are only two published periodical price indexes compiled by agents for the use of librarians in their budget preparations. Some agents may produce internal analyses of increases to assist in enquiries from their customers. Faxon's and Blackwell's have for some years been carrying out detailed surveys. This is a good illustration of how agents can help librarians by sharing the information available in their databases.

### **Back Issues and Microforms**

Some agents have a special department to deal with back issues and microforms. This is quite uncommon in the USA where there are special jobbers who specialise in this type of business, and the subscription agents only deal with current subscriptions. The good back issues department should hold a comprehensive stock and issue catalogues at regular intervals. They should be willing to search for out of print copies, and maintain up-to-date records about availability from stock, publishers, reprint companies, and on microform.

### **Agents Consolidation Service**

This can be an efficient and rapid means of distribution but it is more expensive as the agent takes on much of the work normally carried out in the library. Even so conditions for libraries in some countries

can make it cost effective, and it does virtually eliminate the missing issue problem. The journals are posted to the agents address, they are checked in, missing issues claimed, the contents of each parcel listed on an advice note, and the library notified the consignment has been sent by airfreight, together with the details of the airway bill, flight number, etc.

This service is particularly popular in countries where there is a lack of expertise and trained staff, rather than a shortage of money.

The agent has to make a handling charge, plus the cost of airfreight. It is a labour intensive service requiring extensive premises and staff. Most agents prefer the traditional method of post direct from the publisher. One or two agents may offer this service as a way of avoiding the higher overseas subscription rates. Publishers generally find this unacceptable because of loss of revenue and they require agents to pay the full overseas price.

## **The Serials Information Chain. Working Together Towards a Common Goal**

THE UNITED KINGDOM SERIALS GROUP (UKSG). The ASA attaches great importance to the work of the UKSG, which, with over 500 members, is going from strength to strength, not only through the popularity of its annual conference and short courses, but through its publishing programme.

It is encouraging that other similar groups have been set up in other parts of the world, most notably in the USA where the NORTH AMERICAN SERIALS INTEREST GROUP (NASIG) is flourishing. Established in 1985 NASIG is an independent organisation that promotes communication and sharing of ideas among all members of the serials information chain – anyone working with or concerned about serial publications.

Their scope is defined to include

opportunities for communication and discussion of mutual problems and interests, to provide a forum for debating 'hot topics' to foster a unity of purpose with diversity, and to arrive at resolutions through teamwork, camaradie and respectful discourse.

There are over eight hundred members. A very successful annual conference is held each June. Publications include NASIG Newsletter, Annual Conference Proceedings and a Membership Directory. Enquiries about membership should be sent to Ms Lisa Peterson, NASIG Secretary, Head, Acquisition/Serials Dept., University of California, Library, PO Box 5900, Riverside, CA 92517-5900, USA.

The AUSTRALIAN SERIALS SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP (ASSIG) has the following objectives:

- \* To bridge the gap between the national and international producer and the end user of serials by providing a forum for the interchange of information, ideas, suggestions and the solution of problems.
- \* To promote professional awareness among all those concerned with serials.
- \* To provide continuing education for serials and to encourage and assist library educators to provide adequate coverage of serials in their courses.
- \* To identify and discuss future directions in serials.
- \* To co-operate with similar groups overseas.

Members receive ASSIG Newsletter which is published quarterly. Regular seminars and workshops are held around Australia.

Membership enquiries should be sent to: Dale Chatwin, ASSIG Secretary, Technical Services Manager, A.B.S. Library, Belconnen, ACT 2617, Australia.

The SOUTH AFRICAN SERIALS INTEREST GROUP (SASIG) was formed in 1987 with the following objectives:

- \* To stimulate awareness of the importance of serials and serials librarianship.
- \* To provide a forum and informal network for the exchange of ideas, opinions and points of view.
- \* To provide continuous education through seminars and workshops.
- \* To interface with subscription agents as a means of improving communication for the benefit of serials personnel.
- \* To keep members informed of national and international trends and developments in the field of serials librarianship by holding regular meetings and through the publication of a newsletter.

At least three meetings are held every year. Membership enquiries should be sent to The Treasurer, SASIG, P.O. Box 868, Houghton 2041, South Africa.

The NVB SERIALS GROUP has recently been formed in the Netherlands.

Aims:

- \* To promote the discussion between all associated groups about the function and form of publication of the scientific periodical and other serial publications.
- \* To develop and maintain contacts between all those involved in the creation, production, distribution and use of scientific periodicals.
- \* To increase and promote the knowledge of current problems regarding the creation and use of scientific periodicals.
- \* To stimulate and support the development of research in the field of periodicals management.

Activities:

The group wishes to achieve its aims by holding meetings – courses, congresses and workshops – and by representation in relevant organisations. In actual fact the group is concerned with (amongst other) the following subjects:

- \* Activities and functions of subscription agents.
- \* Optimising periodicals logistics.
- \* Collection development policies:
  - optimising the flow of information from publisher to library and end user
  - decision making as regards collection building
- \* Computerisation:
  - automated serials control
  - the processes in the chain: publisher-subscription agent, library-end user
- \* The making of proposals regarding the introduction of ‘the scientific journal’ as a curriculum subject in library schools, as well as proposals concerning the contents thereof.
- \* To maintain contacts with NASIG and UKSG, and to investigate the desirability and feasibility of a ‘European Serials Group’.

Membership enquiries should be sent to Mrs M van den Bosch, University Library Utrecht, Bibliotheek Centrum Uithof, Postbus 80124, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands.

### **A Critical Look at Publishers, Agents and Libraries**

If the common aim is to get the right journal to the right reader as quickly as possible, what are the factors working against this?

#### *a) In the publisher's office:*

The problems are only compounded when they introduce a new computer system, which is badly designed and poorly implemented. Even now, extraordinary things still happen, like the company who had their new system designed by a software house who forgot to consult the manager of the subscription department!

It is not surprising to find in these

circumstances a system which is accessed by a unique number rather than the name of the subscriber. It is not unknown for the unique numbers to contain up to twenty digits. The absence of a link between the payment records and the subscription records, means that claims can only be satisfied if the agent or subscriber produces proof of payment in the form of a copy of a cancelled cheque.

Increasingly in the USA publishers are using so called fulfilment agencies. All too often this is a misnomer. Although keeping control of the editorial and production processes, the publisher appoints an agency to maintain the mailing list and distribute the journal. The more popular mass market magazine publishers have used this method for some years. Recently it has spread to the more academic and technical type of journal. This is regrettable. The publisher loses control of this vital part of the business. All the evidence seems to be that there is a degradation in service and an increase in the number of claims and queries. Other problems can be caused by the appointment of a sole distributor, who does not hold stock and merely acts as a forwarding agent. The prices charged may also be inflated.

It is most important for new subscription rates to be fixed by the end of August in time for the Autumn renewal run. Very often the publishers' system for dealing with incorrect payments are slow and cumbersome.

Librarians are particularly irritated by the following:

1. Only printing enough copies for the current mailing list, then being unable to supply claims and back date new subscriptions and late renewals.
2. Slowness in starting up a new subscription.
3. Producing extra volumes during the year for which additional payment is required. Varying the number of issues in a volume.

4. Automatically supplying expensive supplements without first seeking confirmation that they are required.
5. Variable policy for issuing title page, contents list and index.
6. Unsympathetic, rigid cancellation policies. There are often genuine reasons for late cancellation, particularly in a time of sudden budget cuts.
7. Unrealistic claims policy which does not take account of distance.
8. Accepting payment in advance, and then falling severely behind with the publishing schedule. Sometimes trying to catch up by publishing double numbers.
9. Failure to check mailing list for garbled addresses, and duplicate entries.
10. Sending first, second, third reminders to subscribers who order through agents.
11. Using cheap wrappers which tear, fall off and do not offer any protection from possible damage.
12. Making title changes at the whim of an editor, and being blissfully unaware of the extra work this causes serial cataloguers and subscription agents.

*b) In the agent's office:*

Just as publishers vary in size and sophistication, so do agents. Almost certainly the 80-20 rule applies, and most of a publisher's business will be with about 12 large agents, but most of the trouble will be with the hundreds of other small ones and libraries who deal direct.

In particular the bookshop dabbling in periodicals is unlikely to be efficient. There will almost certainly be delays in payment, particularly if foreign currencies are involved. Too many orders will be referred back as 'unable to trace, please let us know the address of the publisher'. The work is, as everyone knows, very seasonal and if the agent still uses a manual system very substantial backlogs will be inevitable in the

Autumn. Failure to keep accurate journal records will lead to incorrect payments and inability to record vital information correctly. If periodicals are only a sideline for the bookseller, it will almost certainly be a Cinderella department, run on a shoestring. There is always the danger of small agents going bankrupt. At the other end of the scale, very large agents can neglect personal service and fail to communicate satisfactorily with their customers.

*c) In the librarian's office:*

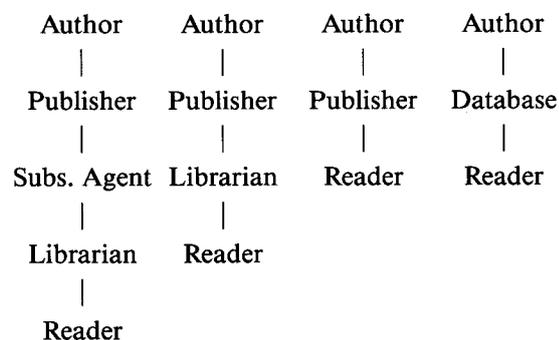
Problems are caused by:

- Frequent change of agent.
- Annual tendering/bidding. This is a most unsuitable and disruptive system, completely inappropriate for subscriptions to periodicals.
- Obtaining multiple subscriptions from different sources.
- Paying an invoice direct, when standing order is with agent.
- Poor checking-in, leading to unnecessary claims. This job is not suitable for temporary, inexperienced staff.
- Poorly designed and implemented automated serial control systems.
- The status of the periodicals department varies from library to library, generally much of the routine work is done by inexperienced part-time, or very junior staff and the error rate is high.
- Mis-shelving.
- Late cancellations.
- Allowing the 'query' pile to get out of hand.
- Failure to claim promptly.
- Failure to renew on time.
- Failure to monitor the periodicals regularly.
- Failure to notice title changes.

It seems that there are attitudes and organisational mistakes common to all three, and these fall into three categories – methods, staff and computers. We should be learning from each others mistakes.

### The Future

There are a number of variations in the information chain:



At present serials are still the most dynamic force in the information chain and are the sharp edge for the advancement of knowledge, which is later consolidated into book form.

Much debate is taking place about the future of the hard-copy journal, and whether or not it will be replaced by electronic versions and article delivery services, etc. Our view is that it is here to stay for a good many years, but increasingly will be complemented by new formats. Human vanity alone will ensure this because people do like to see their article published in a visible form so that it can be produced when applying for a job, or shown to friends and relations.

It is convenient, cheap and easy to provide reading spaces for readers to study

journals and, as is often required, several journals at a time. There is the advantage of portability, whether the reader is at home, on a train, or in a library. The hard-copy journal can also reach the most out of the way parts of the world where even a typewriter would be regarded as advanced technology. We do, however, believe that there are certain fast moving subject areas producing a wealth of information where the databases have already come into their own. We believe that whatever the method used for the transfer of information – hard copy, microform, CD-ROM databases, document delivery, etc., there is a role for the subscription agent although in the future they may be re-named information brokers.

Finally, we emphasise that the supply of periodicals relies on mutual trust and respect between librarian, agent and publisher. We must all work together and not be afraid to take part in frank and constructive discussions which is why members of the ASA are anxious to participate in conferences, seminars, workshops, etc.

Whatever your role in the information chain, we believe there are four key criteria for success. They are:

1. Expertise.
2. Technology.
3. Service.
4. Commitment.

John Merriman can be contacted at:  
The Association of Subscription Agents, Thames Gardens,  
Charlesbury, Oxford  
OX7 3QH, England.