

Workshop on Serials Prices

Theresa Shergold – University of Brighton

Hazel Woodward at European Serials Conference, 10 September 1992

The Second European Serials Conference in Noordwijkerhout in the Netherlands enjoyed a wide and diverse programme of workshops and lectures. One such workshop led by Hazel Woodward was on Serials prices. Serials prices are always an emotive topic producing often lively discussion amongst librarians, publishers and subscription agents. This workshop had all of these groups represented and did engender an interesting and constructive discussion. As an introduction to the issues involved the following points were made.

Librarians over the past years have been concerned over the following issues, the growth of serials literature, escalation of serials prices and the static and sometimes decreasing library budgets. The growth of literature has been well documented. It is startling to note that Ulrich's Periodical Directory in 1932 (1st edition) had 6,000 titles, in 1992 (30th edition) this has reached 118,500. The average price of a scholarly journal has risen from £64 in 1982 to £192 in 1992. The average price for a scientific/technical journal is £301 and for a humanities/social sciences title £70.

This places increasing strains on libraries' budgets. Libraries are acquiring less and less but it is costing more and more. For the University sector it means that libraries are acquiring more serials and this is consequently eroding into the basic stock buying. There are obvious implications for undergraduate teaching material.

Librarians have not been slow in voicing their concern over serial prices. Publishers have often been asked to explain why serial prices are escalating. They attribute this to

the increase in direct costs — typesetting, printing, binding, materials postage, increase in number of high quality papers submitted (producing larger issues and often more volumes), increase in editorial costs (less subsidy) and reduction in circulation levels — falling subscriptions.

The pricing of serials is a complex issue and a number of factors must be taken into consideration, for example dual pricing (i.e. different prices for different countries), different currencies for different geographical areas, institutional and individual rates. Another issue raised is the way in which exchange rates can affect the pricing of journals. This has been particularly felt this year by British libraries because of the recent sterling devaluation. Serials pricing has become such a debated issue that it has even produced its own electronic newsletter and has contributions from authors, publishers, subscription agents, and librarians.

A lively debate followed the above introduction by Hazel Woodward. It was pointed out by some publishers that it is not a crisis of journal prices but instead a crisis of information management. Following on from this theme, Librarians present confirmed that there is a problem of identifying a core collection and perhaps that moving towards access to information via document delivery rather than in maintaining expensive core serial collections would be a solution. The "old universities" mentality of maintaining large periodical collections would need to be rethought and would require librarians to embrace the concept of access rather than ownership. It would also necessitate that Librarians monitor and collect vital management information about collection usage to inform this process.

However, document delivery is not without its problems. It was pointed out that recent cuts at the BLDSC serials collections means that Librarians cannot rely on the BLDSC to supply this service but will have to look for alternative suppliers for titles no longer held by the BLDSC. In this light perhaps the role of the subscription agent will need to change as the reduction in subscriptions to serials shifts towards a need for on demand document delivery from selected journals. The publishers warned that on demand access to journals will lead to publishers only publishing what the ‘experts’ within the scientific community recognise as the core titles. This will have inevitable consequences for the nature of

literature being produced and for knowledge in general. Other publishers pointed out that too much credence is given to academic community’s role in the process and stressed that market forces dictate the use of a journal. It was pointed out that the problem posed for librarians that of maintaining collections within tight budgetary constraints meant that pressure should be levied by Chief Librarians to lobby for greater funds to cope with this problem.

It is clear that the topic of serials prices is a complex one involving a number of issues and perspectives depending on whether you are the publisher, subscription agent or Librarian. What is clear is that changes in technology will mean that many of the roles of each of these groups is going to be challenged.