

## WILLING THE FUTURE: THE TWENTY PERCENT GAME

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*A survey of SCONUL members to try and obtain a consensus of opinion on the speed of decline of the printed journal and the effect on cancellation policies.*

To what extent can people's expectations determine the future shape of things? This is one of the questions underlying an exercise I recently carried out in my role as Chair of the Advisory Committee on Scholarly Communications of the UK Standing Conference of National and University Libraries (SCONUL). I am very conscious of the great uncertainty about the future which most people in the journals business feel. But I wondered whether I might find a broad level of agreement as to the pace at which events are likely to unfold.

There are about one hundred university libraries in full SCONUL membership, and over the summer I put the following question to them:

"Given the disproportionate increase in the cost of printed journals, and the impact of information technology, and given any other factor you think may be relevant, by what date do you think that the number of print-on-paper journals currently received by your library will have declined to twenty per cent of the present number?"

The question carried the assumption that some journals will continue to be supplied as print on paper for ever- in practical terms as far as we mortals are concerned. The question being asked was: how soon, do you think, will "time up" be called on the remainder?

Every library has a good reason for its own answer. For example those libraries which are heavily biased towards science and technology, where both the problem and the opportunity are greatest, would naturally tend to an earlier date, and the libraries strong in humanities a later one. So I expected to receive a variety of answers.

I closed the book when I had received 58 replies. The best way to give the outcome is in date bands - which go as follows:

1995-2000	8
2001-2005	7
2006-2010	18
2011-2015	8
2016-2020	7
2021-2025	2
2026-2030	1
2031-2040	0
2041-2045	2
2046-2050	3
>2050	2

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As you can see, the period 2006-2010 is strongly favoured, and if you add the two immediately preceding periods, you have already accounted for more than half the respondents. There is a flavour of consensus to this, considering how far ahead we are looking.

It is interesting to reflect on these predictions in the light of statistics of current journals holdings. For example, I predicted 2010 - before I saw the other predictions. This means the University of Southampton Library, which currently takes 6,000-6,500 titles will have to shed at least 300 printed titles a year, every year between now and 2010. We are certainly not shedding at that rate right now. Not surprisingly, we must all expect that there will be a "cancellations curve" which will probably start to rise significantly more steeply early in the next century, if these predictions are to come true.

One thing we shall probably find is that titles will not waste evenly across the board, or even evenly in a broad subject area such as "science" or "medicine." Some subjects (e.g. high energy and theoretical physics and certain areas of the life sciences) seem to be exploring options more rapidly than others. We may therefore suddenly

find ourselves with a viable option for electronic access in one subject which will lead to huge cancellations of print very rapidly in that particular subject area.

Another interesting question is: are librarians to be Leninists or Trotskyists? As I understand it, Leninists say: "Since history tells us that it is bound to happen, we must await the inevitable but be prepared to adapt to it." Trotskyists, on the other hand, say: "Since history tells us that it is bound to happen, we must do all we can to hasten the inevitable."

It would be interesting to me to know how such an exercise would turn out, if the same question were put to the Directors of libraries in membership of the ARL. Of course, the outcome of the SCONUL response may already be tending to skew the result. Still, if we had a situation where the vast majority of library directors in the UK and the US were of common mind on this matter, it might divert our energies from speculation to organisation. As I hinted at the beginning, if we're most of us convinced about the time scale in which it is likely to happen, that could be quite a powerful impetus in itself towards making it happen.