

## SERIALS LIBRARIANSHIP: A MANCUNIAN PERSPECTIVE

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*This paper is a written version of a presentation given during the UKSG's Serials Roadshow at Manchester Metropolitan University in March 1995. It offers an overview of the work of the Periodicals Librarian at UMIST Library and Information Service, and looks at some of the problems typically encountered.*

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"What does a serials librarian do?" is a question I have often been asked, not least by curious colleagues who have seen me prowling in the shadows between towering stacks of *The Engineer*, clutching swatches of brightly-coloured buckram and other mysterious paraphernalia. In former days I could offer little more than a puzzled shrug in answer. I knew what the job entailed, but how does one begin to explain it? Indeed, it was only when I began to compose my first UKSG Roadshow talk that I visualised a coherent picture of my role.

Of course, not all serials librarians undertake precisely the same duties, but our general objective is probably the same: to get the journals to the users with a minimum of delay. The differences in role seem to spring from the various ways in which serials departments are placed within the organisational structure of the library as a whole. At UMIST, for instance, the organisational situation is broadly similar to that of many other institutions, with my own 'Periodicals Section' being a part of the Library's Technical Services and Administration Division (hereafter TSAD), alongside other back-room operations such as Cataloguing and Orders/Acquisitions. The demarcation lines between the Orders and Periodicals Sections are often blurred, chiefly due to the former's responsibility for handling subscription payments and most other aspects of serial-related expenditure. The respective roles of each section will be made clearer below.

First, though, a few pieces of background information. UMIST is an acronym for the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, a city-centre university of some 5000 students and 1500 staff, with a teaching and research emphasis on science, engineering, management and languages. The Library comprises 50 staff, of whom 15 are professional, and currently receives approximately 1000 journals on subscription, together with a hundred or so gifts. Expenditure on subscriptions stands at roughly £350,000 for the current financial year (1994-95).

The Periodicals Section is staffed by myself and two library assistants, both of whom spend approximately one third of their working day away from the Section, undertaking timetabled counter duties and bookshelving. During periods of holiday or absence, the Section can call upon the services of a TSAD 'floater' to keep the journals flowline moving, so as to avoid a backlog of

un-processed journals: two days' worth can often seem like a deluge.

The day-to-day routine of the Section begins with the arrival, usually in mid-morning, of the Library's post. This manifests itself in the form of two bulging sacks, each containing assorted letters, parcels and other items, which are promptly sorted by two members of TSAD staff and forwarded to appropriate colleagues. After the process of distribution is complete, all that remains of the morning's post is a stack of newly-arrived and neatly packaged journals. This stack is immediately split into two separate portions, one consisting of all journals whose titles begin with the letters A to I, the other for titles beginning J to Z. Each Periodicals Assistant has responsibility for receipting an alphabetical "half" and for all the associated processes, from check-in through to claiming. The first task, however, is to statistically analyse each of the two stacks of journals, with the aid of a ruler, so as to give a figure representing the daily expansion of the Library's journals collection in terms of shelf-space consumed. We may find, for instance, that we have received forty centimetres of journals on an average day; at the end of a twelve month period we can cumulate the daily totals to give a fairly accurate assessment of how much the journals collection has increased in shelf-length. This method of data-gathering, although rudimentary, nevertheless serves the purpose well, providing a useful indication not only of future pressures on storage-space, but also of fluctuations in the amount of work passing through the Periodicals Section.

Until January 1995, all the processes involved in journal check-in at UMIST had utilised a manual system which, like all such systems, was straightforward but rather unwieldy, involving handwritten recording of journal receipt in paper files. The introduction this year of BLCMP's Talis "Open Orders" module has led to automation of check-in, and has already made the entire procedure seem far tidier than before. Newly-arrived journal issues are thus checked-in on Talis, then labelled and security-tagged, before being placed in the appropriate display area of the Library. The role of the Periodicals Librarian within the check-in routine is as a collection-point for any queries which arise from the work of the

two Assistants. Among the various oddities which may be encountered are specimen copies, supplementary material, journals whose titles have changed beyond recognition, and all manner of ephemeral-looking items, many of which will be passed swiftly to the Library's waste-paper collection. Anything remotely useful is dealt with accordingly, or is passed to whichever members of the Library staff may find it of relevance.

This, then, is the basic daily routine of the Periodicals Section, around which a number of related additional procedures are undertaken as necessary. Among these is the handling of "new" journals, either those to which the Library has recently subscribed or extra titles appearing suddenly within an overall subscription package. Each year, the Library cancels a number of titles in order to make sufficient funds available for subscriptions to journals which have been recommended by academic departments. Decisions as to whether or not a new subscription will be placed are taken by the Library management, after consideration of such factors as cost, number of potential users, and availability of the title at other local libraries. The placing of a subscription is handled by the Orders Section, usually via our subscription agent, and the Periodicals Section is alerted as to the expected date of arrival of the first issue. A similar process occurs whenever a title is cancelled, with the Orders Section handling the subscription side of things and the Periodicals Section closing the holdings and check-in records as soon as the final issue arrives. A subscription may be cancelled because it has registered as a low-use title on the Library's ongoing survey of current-issue usage, or because an academic department wishes to replace it with a title which is deemed to be more useful for teaching or research purposes. As in the case of new subscriptions, the Library management considers various factors, such as duplication of the title at other local libraries and the possible effect of its cancellation on other departments whose own students may have made use of it.

The process of opening, closing and otherwise amending a journal holdings record is undertaken by the Periodicals Librarian, the data being manipulated on the Cataloguing module of Talis, with the prime objective of ensuring that OPAC

information is correct and as up-to-date as possible. Current problems raised by OPAC users tend to be legacies of the transfer to Talis of holdings data from our former automation system in 1993, a process which has left the ubiquitous residue of idiosyncrasies scattered amongst the journal records. The identification and correction of these problems is a time-consuming task which is understandably an obvious priority.

Besides Talis, the automation system used most frequently by the Periodicals Section is Swets' subscription database DataSwets, which allows the Section's two Assistants to input journal claims without recourse to letter or fax. Five years ago, the claims procedure was still entirely manual, leading to the generation of large amounts of paper by staff in the Section. Since the automation of claiming, however, the procedure seems to be much neater and easier to monitor. Most recently, the residual reliance on paper for certain correspondence has been eroded further by the establishment of an e-mail link to Swets. As with the check-in routine, my own role in the claims procedure is as a query-point, dealing with any unresolved claims which seem particularly problematical. Aside from a strictly "technical" role, I often find myself acting as an advice-shop for all kinds of journal-related problems. A colleague working at the Library's enquiry desk may, for example, be wrestling with an enigmatically-abbreviated journal title on a student's reading-list, and might wonder if it "rings any bells" in the mind of the Periodicals Librarian. On occasion I have been introduced to enquiring users as the Library's "Journals Expert", a label which seems to deny me the option of pleading complete ignorance when presented with the task of deciphering *Zs. Allg. Erdk.* or some other erudite hieroglyph.

One persistent problem, which most libraries seem to face, is the need to make space available for a journals collection's inexorable and inevitable expansion. One of the more irritating characteristics of a journal is surely that, unlike a book, it grows, often at an unexpected and alarming rate. Thus, a title whose format comprises six thin issues annually might expand by a mere two inches per annum, a negligible growth-rate which is likely to cause few

headaches, but a weightier title which shows the same growth-rate every fortnight can cause real problems if left untended. The simplest solution is to shunt its neighbours around, so as to create, say, ten years' worth of breathing space. Such plans soon go awry if, for example, one of the neighbouring journals suddenly increases its frequency from quarterly to monthly, or if the Library decides to subscribe to a journal whose position in the alphabetical sequence corresponds exactly to a chunk of precious and hard-won breathing-space. On the other hand, a journal whose expansion is encroaching on the space reserved for adjacent titles may be temporarily cancelled or, better still, may cease publication. Another solution is to withdraw from overcrowded shelves various old or under-used back-runs to a storage area, hoping their removal will not arouse undue concern. Outright disposal of journals is anathema to most self-respecting serials types, but is a step which management may recommend if storage problems become critical.

Space for journal expansion is not, unfortunately, the only problem to be faced. Money, or lack of it, is undoubtedly the chief concern, for without the necessary funds a Library cannot manage its journals collection to an acceptable standard, neither in terms of subject-coverage nor in relation to the maintenance of existing holdings. Constricted resources inevitably lead to cancelled subscriptions, and the same can be said of instances of seemingly excessive inflation of prices. Pressure on a library's subscriptions budget can in turn reduce the amount of money available for other activities, such as journal binding and the purchase of replacement issues. Some problems seem to form themselves into depressing chains. For example, a heavily-used title may be considered as a priority item for binding as soon as its annual volume is complete. However, one or more issues might have suffered mutilation or theft so, unless there are funds available to purchase replacements, the volume must be bound incomplete or left unbound. Users seeking the damaged or stolen issues will thus be obliged to scour other libraries for an alternative copy or apply for the information from further

afield, thereby placing pressure on the Inter Library Loans budget.

And what might the future hold for "Journals Experts"? Colleagues who point grimly to the latest article on electronic journals and inform me that my days are numbered may indeed be gifted with foresight, but I hope not. Several years ago, most of the signs looked positive. A prime case was the advent of CD-ROMs, which were soon removing many anxieties over the storage and management of large collections of abstracting

journals. The scenario looks rather different nowadays. To whom, for instance, should a user turn when seeking advice on accessing a full-text electronic journal? Both the systems librarian and the serials librarian should be able to offer assistance, but which of the two will be asked first? The burden lies with Journals Experts themselves to adapt their skills and knowledge to the new technological advances, lest we all be relegated to a purely archival role as custodians of our institutions' old and dusty back-runs.