

THE OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES OF THE PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION'S SERIAL PUBLISHERS EXECUTIVE (SPE)

John Davies

The SPE aims to ensure that serial publishing is given its rightful place and recognition in the scheme of things. This article defines its objectives and examines the changes that are having an impact on publishing in the 1990s.

John Davies, Director of the Council of Academic and Professional Publishers, The Publishers Association, 19 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3HJ

Publishing turnover for academic and professional books in the United Kingdom was £694 million last year. Turnover for academic and professional journals was £626 million. Each year Britain exports £236 million worth of academic books, £228 million worth of academic and professional journals. British journal turnover in the world market is therefore almost half that of books and its export performance is virtually the same. Serial publishing is thus a very significant element of the output of British academic and professional publications.

It was this recognition that led in the early 1980s to the formation at The Publishers Association of the Serial Publishers Executive (SPE). British learned and professional journals were clearly of sufficient importance and strength in the market to demand proper representation and a policy and agenda of their own. Previously, journal publishers had met under the more amorphous banner of a Learned Journals Group on the basis of occasional seminars. The new challenges to the industry, such as the decline in public spending, the advent of copyright licensing and the development of the new technology, required a more systematic approach. The Executive has been very fortunate in the leadership that it has received since that date. Jamie Cameron (Institution of Mechanical Engineers), Sally Morris (John Wiley), David Hill (Routledge) and Alan Singleton (Institute of Physics) all made penetrating and incisive contributions to mapping the priorities and objectives of SPE.

The basic objectives of SPE have been fivefold:

- to represent the learned and professional journal publishers in all appropriate arenas of the market;
- to aid the serial publishing industry in dealing with legal, copyright and licensing matters;
- to provide further specialist central services linked to the needs of journal publishers;
- to liaise with key organisations representing other interests within the journal publishing process;
- to disseminate to serial publishers relevant information on the situation of their industry.

The market for learned and professional journals has two distinct halves, both of almost equal importance: higher education and the professions. The first of these markets, higher education, is currently under considerable stress and the Government's favourite guru, Sir Ron Dearing, has been called in to head a National Committee of Inquiry into its future. The pressure of hugely increased student numbers in recent years is causing cracks in the funding structure. There is loose talk of universities creating their own publications. In these circumstances, it is vital that the importance and the track record of the UK commercial journal publishing industry is underlined. The time, effort and investment needed to produce the quality product that the universities receive today are considerable and very unlikely to be matched by the beleaguered institutions themselves. In order to reinforce these points, the Publishers Association produced a 30-page submission to the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education in November 1996.

The professional market has been more stable and has not been subject to the same degree of erratic funding as has the public sector. Companies and firms where the priority is on research and information have generally been able to ensure that they maintain the flow of material in serial print or electronic form that is essential to their activity. In key areas of this market, like medicine and law, the Publishers Association works through specialist publisher groups which focus very directly on those sectors and co-operate very closely with the Serial Publishers Executive.

Serials are in the front line of issues concerned with copyright. Representatives of the Association's journal constituency are strongly in evidence on the Boards of the Copyright Licensing Agency and the Publishers Licensing Society. The licensing of photocopying in the United Kingdom now yields over £16 million per year for rights holders. It encompasses higher education, businesses such as the pharmaceutical industry and law firms and Government Departments including the British Library Document Supply Centre.

Beyond photocopying, the electronic revolution is now in full swing. It is estimated that by the end of the millennium 50 per cent of journals will be delivered online. Higher education has developed an electronic libraries programme financing pilot projects to the tune of £15 million including electronic journals, document delivery service, subject databases, on-demand publishing, digitalisation and site-licensing. Leading serial publishers are closely involved in these experiments and the Publishers Association has formed a series of working parties with the universities' Committee on Electronic Information to address five central issues: licensing agreements, clearance mechanisms, interpretation of fair dealing, networking and access, retention of materials. These working parties expect to report in April 1997. While certain services can be directly created and delivered by publishers to the commercial and professional market, there is also pressure from companies there to create their own databases and discussions have been initiated with key players.

The activities of the Serial Publishers Executive in these vital areas of development cannot be seen as freestanding or self-contained. A number of other key organisations must be and are drawn into discussions: libraries (through the Standing Conference of National and University Libraries and other specialist organisations), subscription agents (through their association) and the new developing document delivery services (such as BioMedNet). Services are also being developed within the publishing industry, and close contact must be kept with these and with parallel publishing associations. A very recent seminar with the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP) reviewed this aspect of the landscape. The United Kingdom Serials Group, which draws into its membership all these interests, presents an essential window on the moving scene. As export is the lifeblood of journal publishing, the Serials Committee of the International Association of Scientific, Technical and Medical Publishers has a central role.

Copyright management and the emerging electronic framework lie at the heart and future

of serials publishing. They are not however the only issues that need to concern journal publisher. The Publishers Association sponsors Book Industry Communications, which is currently involved at the centre of development of item/contribution identifiers. The British Library sit on the Executive and discussions extend beyond copyright licensing to legal deposit and the future of the International Standard Serial Number Centre. Co-operation with Book House Training Centre has led to the construction of courses to meet the special needs of journal publishers in management, production and marketing. The accent on quality is reflected in SPE's sponsorship of the Charlesworth Journal Design Award. Lately, specific aspects of the role of subscription agents in relation to publishers have been under review.

In many descriptions of academic and professional publishing, the term 'book' is very prominent. In most instances, we are talking of the book and journal publishing industry. An overriding aim of SPE is to ensure that serial publishing is given its rightful place and recognition in the scheme of things. It was apparent during the preparations for the Dearing submission that the market for books is much better documented than the market for journals. In attempting to redress this balance, SPE finances each year a survey of *Trends in Journal Subscriptions*. This looks closely at levels of subscriptions, sizes of journals and prices and is essential background reading prior to comment on charges for journals. It is planned to extend this exercise in the near future and to seek for journal publishers a flow of market information comparable to that received by their colleagues who produce books.

Within the United Kingdom, academic and professional libraries remain the predominant market for serials, with purchases each year almost reaching £100 million, half of these British products. SPE therefore produces an

annual analysis of university periodical expenditure by institution giving totals and sums per student. Spending in some universities is as depressingly low as £15 to £20 per student per year. In conjunction with the British Library, a survey was also undertaken of acquisitions in commercial and professional libraries. All information on the serials market is relayed to publishers by a weekly headline sheet, a two monthly newsletter and a special *Serials Bulletin*.

James Boswell compared his celebrated serial or journal to a cake of portable soup, a little being diffused into a considerable portion. Similarly, modern journals produce a rich, deep and estimable broth of academic ideas and opinions. In the days of cans and cuppasoup, Boswell's cake of soup has become derelict. The same may happen to paper journals as the electrons take over, but the sustenance is in the content not the format. It must be a central preoccupation of SPE to ensure that the considerable contribution of serial publishers to the academic and professional world is fully recognised and properly remunerated.

Note: Further information on the activities of the Serial Publishers Executive may be obtained from the Council of Academic and Professional Publishers, The Publishers Association, 19 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3HJ (0171 580 6321). Of the documents referred to in the above article, the submission to the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education on The Present and Future Contribution of British Publishing to Higher Education in the United Kingdom, is available free of charge. The survey of *Acquisitions in Special Libraries and Trends in Journal Subscriptions 1995* are available at differential prices to PA members and non-members. The *Academic and Professional Publishing Newsletter* and the *Serials Bulletin* are available on subscription to non-members of the PA who are not publishers.