SERIALS HOUSEKEEPING IN A FEDERAL SETTING

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The introduction and operation of a second-generation serials housekeeping system within a complex federal library structure is described. Some of the pitfalls are mentioned, and some actual and potential benefits outlined.

As a large and complex organisation, the University of Oxford has almost inevitably evolved a complex library structure. Only very recently has a Directorate of Library Services been created. A basic tripartite structure of centrally-, departmentally- and independently-funded libraries hides further subtleties of management and huge variations in size. It was only during the negotiations for a new library housekeeping system that the conglomerate came to be labelled as a federal system by way of convenient shorthand. Two decisions have assisted in the construction of a serials management system capable of serving this disparate grouping. The first was the establishment many years ago of a centralised Libraries Automation Service which runs and supports an integrated housekeeping system available to all libraries within the University; this has, irrespective of the vendor package actually delivered, always been badged as Oxford Libraries Information System (OLIS). A second decision, which has been beneficial to those libraries in the STM sector, was the use of central resources for the retrospective cataloguing of periodicals onto the OLIS database which has provided a conveniently-available bibliographic infrastructure.

Oxford first automated using DOBIS/LIBIS, which incorporated a serials module. When increasing usage and a wish to move towards a client/server approach to service delivery demanded a new, proprietary system, GEAC was the chosen supplier following a tendering and evaluation procedure and the new system was implemented in tranches from summer 1996. GeoCAT is used for cataloguing, but the serials module, which went live towards the end of the year, at present uses the character-based Advance system. A number of Oxford-specific modifications are incorporated: for example, although the system reasonably presumes that every library can expect the same number of issues of any given periodical, they will not necessarily all be expected on the same day since libraries will have different supply routes. The transfer of records for titles checked in under the old system, a potential source of anxiety, went remarkably smoothly, thanks to close co-operation between automation service staff at Oxford and the system vendor.

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The lead-up to the new system introduction required close co-operation between representatives of the libraries and the automation service in learning and setting up the system, writing a locally-specific manual, and arranging training. The manual has subsequently been rewritten (by a member of library staff seconded to the automation service for the purpose) to incorporate the wisdom derived from a year's experience of the system, and will doubtless be networked on the University's intranet at some future date.

The number of libraries adopting the serials module was relatively low at first, and by chance they tended to be in different subject areas so that it was the exception for a title to be acquired by more than one library on the system. Now that more libraries are participating, the advantages and disadvantages of a shared system are showing more clearly. The practical advantage is that if a first comer has done the work involved in creating a bibliographic record (where necessary) and setting up a prediction pattern for a journal, another library is spared much of the effort if it takes the same title. The disadvantages are that care has to be taken over changes (e.g. to reflect changes of frequency and other aspects of publication) which may impact on other libraries, or which may cause other libraries' innocent actions to impact on one's own. In certain areas uniformity of practice may be essential - hence the need for a lucid and comprehensive manual. There is, of course, much to be said in favour of the closer co-operation fostered by a shared system which provides a ready-made mutual support network. More formally, participating libraries form a Serials Special Interest Group whose chair is a member of the Libraries Automation Working Panel, the central advisory body. E-mail lists are increasingly the means of communication.

Experience has taught that operating an automated serials housekeeping system cannot be regarded as saving in direct administration over manual recording: a paper record, after all, does not require to be told when to expect the next issue. Claims for missing issues are more timely but also more numerous and often too previous, and need to be filtered. A feature of DOBIS/LIBIS much missed was the ability automatically to vary predicted receipt dates according to the dates of recent actual receipts; this black art seems to have been lost from most commercial systems now on the market.

The system interfaces closely with the catalogue record: elements of the receipt record, such as 'last issue received' appear on the OPAC, and the holdings statement can be constructed automatically from the receipt records. It is desirable for technical reasons (as well as reader satisfaction) for bibliographic amendments, such as title changes, to be made integrally with related amendments to the acquisition and receiving records; the advantage of this is that only one set of records has to be amended to achieve the desired end. The implication is that staff operating the system need a good understanding of the way in which the serials record interacts with the bibliographic and other records (for example, loans records for those libraries which circulate serials), and, ideally, a knowledge of MARC cataloguing. This impacts on the staffing levels and organisation required. It is also true that at a strategic level the interface between all modules of the system needs to be taken into account. Until the system had gone live, no-one appreciated how fully a sophisticated dynamic serials system would affect and be affected by decisions concerning cataloguing, OPAC display and the circulation system. The learning process continues, particularly now that graphical user interfaces to the OPAC have been launched.

The benefits which 'sell' the system to libraries are

⬧   *For the libraries' clientele* better information about the receipt and whereabouts of periodical parts; information which can be accessed from anywhere within the University network (or beyond). This is all of a piece with a more general strategy of delivering services such as bibliographic tools and full-text electronic journals to the desktop. Within larger libraries, reader services staff have access to the answers to queries which would previously have required the knowledge of those working in technical services.

⬧   *For the library* an integrated housekeeping package with common interfaces and administrative procedures. Surprisingly, libraries have been slow to implement the link

between acquisitions fund management and invoice handling and the remainder of the serials module, although experience suggests that this area is one in which there is the greatest potential for saving time and effort. In particular, taking suppliers' invoices in electronic format is being explored as fruitful. It is also true to say that the theoretical potential of an automated system to deliver statistics and other management information has barely been exploited, partly because of lack of time for a hard-pressed systems staff to do the necessary work, but with increased emphasis at high administrative level within the University on the collection of such data, this area will probably assume a higher profile in future.

Now everyone is busy trying to develop the hybrid library of the future, it sometimes appears that a highly-developed serials management has already become an anachronism. In fact, since at the core of the Oxford library system are institutions widely regarded as libraries of record, the paper journal is still going to have a long life; very few of the titles which are received by the Bodleian Library under the terms of its legal deposit privilege are yet managed through an automated system. Moreover, it is obvious that negotiations for access to electronic journals can only sensibly be carried out on a university-wide basis, and the spirit of co-operation fostered by working within a federal system is going to be much to the fore.