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The Balance Point

Courage of Our Convictions: Making Difficult Decisions about Serial Collections

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Abstract

Three academic librarians, a library administrator, a serials librarian, and a collection development librarian, discuss pressing serials issues as they plan for a move to a new library building. Professional perspectives on serials are juxtaposed as they grapple with issues such as limited storage for paper journals, rising costs of serials, and problems related to serials check-in, e-resources, and document delivery.

Introduction

Regular readers of this column will notice a new name in place of our esteemed past coeditor, Markel Tumlin, who is devoting himself to full-time research this year. I had the pleasure of presenting a workshop with Markel a number of years ago at a North American Serials Interest Group conference, and since then I have enjoyed following Markel's contributions to this column in *Serials Review*. I believe I speak for many other readers when I say that his wit and eloquent writing style in the column were much appreciated and will be missed. I look forward to working with and learning from my experienced and talented coeditor Kay Johnson as we carry on the column's tradition of hosting a platform for stimulating serials discussion where voices in the serials community—some in harmony, others in counterpoint, and others perhaps even dissonant—can come together to find perspective about serials in the "balance point."

What better place to begin a discussion of serials issues than within one's own institution—in my case Appalachian State University Library (ASU), a medium-size, state-funded university library in Boone, North Carolina. I approached three of my colleagues, a library administrator, the serials coordinator, and the collection development coordinator, to bring their different professional perspectives to a discussion about pressing serials-related issues facing the library. Rather than have each librarian write a separate section on one or more serials issues, all agreed that the synergy of conversation could potentially yield unexpected, fruitful results, or as Michel de Montaigne noted in one of his essays, it is good "to sharpen our wits by rubbing them against those of others." [1.]

The timing of the librarians' discussion proved to be critical in light of an impending new 215,000 square-foot library, scheduled for completion in 2005. Many issues that had been simmering for some time, especially those related to evolving resources, such as serials, were coming to the fore and needed resolution before the move into a new building. What follows is a result of their discussions—a composite dialogue among a library administrator (Larry Boyer), a serials librarian (Eleanor Cook), and a collection development librarian (John P. Abbott). This discussion, which contains as many questions about serials as solutions, may be familiar to many academic librarians in similar circumstances. A few readers may decide it is time to conduct a similar discussion.

The conversation

Boyer: I am very glad that we agreed to talk about the cost of buying, maintaining, and managing a serials collection because it has really given me an opportunity to think outside of the box, to question what we are doing, and to wonder what can we do differently at this critical juncture to save money, reallocate staff and perhaps, most importantly, provide better service to our users.

Cook: Yes, we are indeed at a crossroads, a precipice, or whatever metaphor suits your fancy. And we have a lot of obstacles along the way, including those related to the elasticity of our budget, how possible it is to shift resources, staff flexibility in adapting to new duties, administrative vision in selling users on new services, and seizing opportunities to move in new directions. An image that comes to my mind when I consider the shift from print to electronic journals is that of a steep hill. We have been, albeit slowly, climbing to the pinnacle of this hill. Once we come to the top, we can see where we've been and where we are going. We are cresting the hill now. Sliding down the other side, we'll pick up speed as we descend.

Boyer: That brings to mind a question that has continued to demand attention. We recently decided to purchase additional JSTOR collections, consisting of close to 400 titles. Our first purchase of JSTOR and Project Muse materials allowed us to withdraw 5,000 volumes from the collection, but we lacked the courage of our convictions and put them into storage. Can we really afford to continue to house serial titles physically if we have access to them electronically?

Cook: But if we weed materials we now hold through our subscription to JSTOR, where do the volumes go? To the dumpster? To storage? What storage and where? Recent experience suggests that we cannot give them away because hundreds of other libraries are doing the same thing and no one is going to take them. For example, we recently received notice from a large back issues clearinghouse that they would not accept back runs of major publishers who have established online archives of their journals.

Abbott: I am really hesitant to weed JSTOR volumes for a number of reasons. In the university and maybe in public libraries too, old perceived needs fade slowly if at all. Before throwing away several thousand print volumes, I really feel cautioned by Nicholson Baker's observations when he began questioning basic library access and retention processes.[2.] The times are heady with change and the past be damned. I am not a conservative librarian, but it is time to have a second look when a learned person such as Baker, who, though demonized by many as a Luddite, posits in the popular press that the library is piloted by misguided interpretation of needs and is in fact destroying itself from within. Moreover, our ability to predict the future of e-journals is still poor as they evolve in unpredictable ways. And lastly (whew), in San Diego I saw a Rembrandt of St. Bartholomew. Bart is usually portrayed holding a knife, and the painting reminded me of the possible campus reaction to throwing out millions of dollars worth of paper journals. Good St. Bart was skinned alive! While he was martyred for it, I would be living in a cardboard box.

Boyer: As usual, you give me pause and make me laugh, but I am still not convinced. If an average bound periodical requires two-and-a-half inches to store, the first set of JSTOR volumes alone are taking up 420 shelves, or seventy sections, or seven ranges. In our new library building we are building a bound periodicals section with compact shelving which will have approximately 10,000 shelves. We are estimating that the cost for these shelves will be \$400,000, and the cost for constructing the square footage which will contain the compact shelving is perhaps as much as \$2 million. Disregarding any cost for maintenance, the simple cost for housing the JSTOR volumes would be four percent of that or \$96,000. If the second JSTOR purchase also totals about 5,000 volumes the cost rises to nearly \$200,000. These calculations, of course, do not weigh the costs inherent in not being able to purchase other books or journals because we will not have the space to house them because we will be storing 10,000 unnecessary volumes.

Essentially, I would premise that we can no longer afford to physically house these materials in our library. One of the main reasons leading to the creation of JSTOR in the first place was that of space concerns.[3.] JSTOR has committed to archive all of the materials, both physically and electronically. I do not see any reason why we should continue to provide physical copies of these journals once we have purchased access to them through JSTOR. Do you disagree?

Abbott: I don't disagree, but we will need to do a lot of front-end work convincing a number of people on campus about the value of discarding back issues replaced with JSTOR. It will have to be sold to the Library Services Committee and by their aegis then used to convince other major players on campus, the provost, etc. There are at least three groups of invested parties: the traditionalists who want the paper library to always exist; the faux traditionalists who want electronic delivery, but also want a library to smell and look like the British Museum; and the brave new worlders who hold no sentiment for the edifice of the

library and simply want information as fast as possible. The traditionalists are the smallest in number, but are usually the most senior on campus, wield lots of clout, and will be the toughest to convince.

Boyer: What about a solution such as was implemented at Sonoma State University, which installed an automated retrieval system and put more than half of its collections in storage?

Cook: For ASU, off-site storage is not an option for duplicates. We have looked into it, but there is no room on campus, and it is not cost-effective to secure it off-campus. Perhaps someday a regional storage facility could be established for low use, unique items, that could be shared by a number of libraries in the western part of the state, but that is a whole different topic to be explored.

Abbott: Storing little-used items is not the role of a comprehensive university. We are a collection to be used and we rely on the Research 1 schools to serve as the libraries of record. The unique items are different. I suspect there are few valuables in a collection like ours (excluding our special collections), and they are divided between those whose value is dubious and the fewer which are truly valuable and/or useful. Retaining the latter will involve little shelf space. Box the dubious and send them to the closest R-1 library.

Boyer: Moving the conversation along and in a slightly different tack. I have just finished rereading Rick Anderson's article, "Implementing the Unthinkable: The Demise of Periodical Check-in at the University of Nevada," and I found it even more persuasive.[4.] So persuasive, in fact, that I would be ready to abandon our periodicals check-in, claiming, and binding. Rick, who is the director of serial services at the University of Nevada, Reno, began his assault on traditional serials librarianship by asserting that libraries, especially academic libraries, are providing services that are getting little or no use. Among the most egregious of these services is checking in and claiming periodicals. But before I go off and revolutionize our serials check-in half-cocked and make a decision that I later regret, I have some questions that I want to pose to both of you which may help us decide if this is the way we want to go?

Why check in serials? Rick states that libraries have done so in the past for these reasons: "To record that the issue has arrived, to provide a means of monitoring changes to publication frequency and pattern, to detect title changes, splits, and mergers, to claim missing issues, and to serve as a management mechanism for binding processes." [5.] Are these processes important to our users? How much does it cost us to check in serials? Doesn't one of our senior library staff members spend all or most of her time doing or monitoring this process? How many student assistants are employed to do this? I also believe that another staff member spends a majority of her time claiming items not received in the library as expected. Could that time be better used? One way that occurs to me is working on licensing and updating information for access to our electronic journals and aggregators. Am I over simplifying the problem?

Cook: I've been doing a lot of thinking about these questions. And I've seen Rick's presentation several times, and talked to him about what they've done at University of Nevada, Reno. Our serials staff has read the article you cited. What happens if we stop checking in print journals? Rick's experience is not much. But I still fear the possibility of chaos. So I am inclined to move slowly. Perhaps start with printed newspapers, which we do not claim and do not bind. Then identify those journals that we do (claim, bind) or can obtain electronically and stop checking them in. In most cases, if we get a journal online, we either immediately or eventually stop getting it in print anyway. In other words, the whole issue of check-in is a self-leveling problem that will go away on its own, but we can accelerate the process perhaps.

We have already begun eliminating claiming for print issues when we also have access to the online. Again, this will solve itself as we go to more online only. Of course, in the future we will need to find ways to systematically "claim" online issues when they are not accessible and we think they should be. For titles where we still only obtain the print, claiming is still necessary for getting all issues due to us. The fact that we are purchasing fewer print titles all the time means that the claiming we are doing now is more efficient and hopefully successful more of the time.

Abbott: I hear what Rick is saying in his article but issues of control still worry me. We are managing a multimillion dollar operation funded by state tax dollars. How can we in good conscience not know or keep

track of what we have paid to receive, especially because we spend over \$1,000,000 of our budget on paper serials?

Boyer: I think that Rick might say that the price of claiming is far more costly than what you recover.

Cook: In order to be good stewards of our collections, we have to find ways to balance what we are spending our time and money on. I think that is the real issue. Claiming can be worth the time if the claim is discovered within the timeframe in which the publisher honors it, if it is communicated then quickly and accurately, and if the material is worth claiming. We depend greatly on the service of our major serial vendor to make claiming worth our time. With EDI (electronic data interchange) claiming in place, we are able to claim most things fairly routinely and without a lot of effort. The things we spend the most effort on are those titles for which we have to go directly to the publisher and where the publisher is not used to dealing with libraries. Our special collection titles are most time consuming, but we will never be able to get away from those one-of-a-kind items. As we reduce the amount of claiming we do for print materials, claiming can be more effective, and we will only do it for materials we really want to get. From my understanding, that is how claiming is still being done in places like University of Nevada, Reno.

Boyer: A related and ancillary task to checking in and claiming is processing individual journal issues for security. Anderson again skewers this as another thing which libraries do too much. Do you think that we could only put security strips in the most popular titles and forget most of the others?

Cook: We have already reduced the number of security strips we place in journal issues and reducing that further would not be a problem.

Boyer: And binding. Can we take a hard look at what we are binding?

Cook: My preservation instincts react unfavorably to the idea of not binding when we choose to retain a print title. The long-term benefit is greater than the immediate cost if we expect to keep the material for the foreseeable future. Again, we'll have less binding as we move more to online only publications. We can move to a more selective binding program for periodicals and use the savings for other much-needed preservation projects.

Boyer: All the issues we've touched on thus far are important, but with only a limited staff how do we handle all the new transition work, especially when we take into account current work levels that will not change and all the new tasks that will emerge as we move to the new building?

Cook: One critical piece to moving ahead on these challenges is the involvement of the people who are doing the "old" work and most likely will be the same people doing the "new" work. Success is more likely when staff are involved and included in the decision-making process.

During the transition from print to electronic, we need ways to bridge the gap. People cannot just stop doing what they're doing; the whole process needs review.

Boyer: Why not just make the change quickly once the plan is in place? It seems to me there is no better time than the present to get started.

Cook: We could, I suppose, just walk in one day and tell staff to stop doing this and instead start doing that. But how would that go over? With resentment and frustration, I suspect. What's more, the people who are doing the current work are the best ones to figure out how to make the transition. Managing serials, as I like to say, is like nailing Jell-O to the wall—be they print or electronic, they are still slippery rascals. They still require the detailed attention of dedicated staff in order for users to find them and use them. We get requests constantly from public services colleagues for assistance and problem solving related to online journals, and the problems are not so unlike the ones we would get for printed journals. The title has changed and no one has caught it. The link is broken. The numbering has changed and now is confusing. You name it. I feel confident that the staff currently working with printed journals can be trained to work

with online journals. Their years of experience will be an asset to the transition. Student assistant time can be easily reassigned and, in fact, has already been reduced in many of the areas discussed above.

Boyer: Rick also made a point that what really matters to the reader is the availability of information, not whether the physical object is in the library. Wouldn't it be better to provide document delivery on demand than to continue to subscribe to little used journals? Some high-use titles can be housed in the library. The lesser used titles can be provided electronically or in hard copy as quickly as possible, or as Rick characterizes it, with "more efficient and patron-centered document delivery." [6.]

Abbott: There is a political dimension that goes beyond these issues. Through the 1980s and 1990s, most libraries tossed their card catalogs after years of angst. It worked. Other than a few traditionalists (and that is not meant disparagingly), users found the OPAC (Online Public Access Catalog) more useful. There is the same transition happening with most paper journals.

Cook: I suspect faculty who are print dependent will be using resources that are not among the e-only things that we will be moving to first. So they will probably not be affected for some time.

Abbott: The hook is the irrational outrage factor by those uninformed about and inexperienced with the useful power of e-resources. There are still plenty of these folks on campus. Retirements, deaths, and education will remedy some of this problem. Planning and decision making out in the open about these transitions will keep the reasonable parties with us.

Cook: So let me go back to my mountain metaphor. Concerning models of access: One of our sister institutions has moved to a model of pay-per-view for much of their journal needs. Instead of maintaining a full subscription to an online version, they are canceling many journals and, instead, offering their users access through document delivery services "by the drink" so to speak. While we have also been doing this in a limited way, mostly for esoteric, underutilized, or prohibitively expensive journals, there could be some argument for pushing this model further. This is the point where our collection development colleagues need to put their thinking caps on: Do we still maintain the idea of "core" titles? What is the breaking point for maintenance of a subscription versus pay-per-view?

And what about our consortia obligations to share our holdings as much as possible? This whole concept will need serious review in light of the difficulties we have experienced trying to negotiate consortia licenses for journal packages. Consortia agreements to share print subscriptions and not duplicate them cannot be easily replicated when the majority of resources go electronic unless publishers will allow for interlibrary loan. This is starting to happen, but it has been slow to develop. [7.]

Abbott: From a budgetary view I like the pay-for-view model. There is less money spent and less space wasted on unread articles when only the articles needed are acquired. But I am concerned about the fact that serendipity is a very powerful researching tool. Can browsing electronic tables of contents, even with abstracts, effectively replace the journal in hand? Of course, pay-for-view need not just replace paper. The Big Deal e-packages, particularly from STM (science, technology, medicine) publishers could be cancelled in favor of pay-by-the-drink approaches. These arrangements favor faculty and graduate student research styles more than the undergraduate scrambling for information.

Boyer: Isn't a lot of this content available on the aggregators? Particularly when thinking of undergraduates?

Cook: It might be today, but it may not be tomorrow. Some aggregators are more complete than others, and some are more reliable than others. They are all subject to the whims of the publishers with whom they work. One nice trend is that more cover-to-cover content is appearing in aggregators. I believe as more journals go to open access models, this will be the real flood gates that will threaten to drown commercial publishers who charge us an arm and leg for their products.

Abbott: What we are talking about in all of this is the risk factor of losing something that is truly important. There are really two sets of resources we have always provided. The research level that comprised the

majority of our expenditures and is the most lightly used and, second, the tools appropriate for undergraduates. Aggregators are most appropriate for undergrads and the ebb and flow of content there doesn't worry me. If there are several thousand journals covered by the aggregators, there will be enough content for all but a few undergraduate's information needs.

Boyer: The conversation returns to the original question about the courage of our convictions. What decisions can we as managers make and how do we implement them? Everyone get out your calendars because we obviously need another meeting about this.

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