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## *ACQUISITIONS ISSUES IN SERIALS MANAGEMENT*

*Rick Anderson, Editor*

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Welcome to the first installment in the “Acquisitions Issues in Serials Management” column!

The purpose of this inaugural essay is threefold: First, to explain the scope and purpose of the column; second, to invite future contributors; and third, to set out some potentially fruitful topics of discussion.

I use the term *discussion* deliberately. While reports of research and descriptions of projects related to acquisitions processes will be more than welcome, personal essays and opinion pieces will be as well, and there will be no need to affect a more scholarly tone than is called for by your subject. This will be a space in which controversial and radical thinking will be not only allowed, but also encouraged. And responses to such thinking will be encouraged as well—if you’re looking for a safe space in which to speak your mind without fear of challenge or contradiction, then you’ll want to publish elsewhere. In fact, collaborative point/counterpoint pieces would be especially interesting. I’ll be watching the online discussion lists to see whether any likely debating pairs begin to develop; if you get into a good argument with someone on an interesting topic related to the column, there’s a good chance you’ll both eventually hear from me with an invitation to bring the fight onto these pages, where the issues and viewpoints can be developed a bit more systematically and our readers can evaluate the arguments for themselves.

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As for the scope and purpose of the column: Our editor's invitation to me was invigoratingly vague. He asked if I would be interested in editing an "acquisitions" column, a term which, to my mind, covers an excitingly broad range of possible topics covering everything from workflows to pricing models and from collection development issues to vendor relations. The more I think about the specific topics we could cover in this space, the more excited I get about the possibilities. What follows is a list of topics that come to mind immediately, and questions related to each topic that might generate some essay ideas. If one (or more) of these ideas captures your imagination, please contact me and let's talk about turning your thoughts into an article.

*Price inflation.* As serials librarians, are there things we can do to exert a moderating pressure on price increases? Assuming that our best efforts will nevertheless leave us in at least a moderately inflationary environment, what will our coping strategies be? Are there coping strategies commonly in use now that will not be sustainable in the long run? Assuming relatively higher or relatively lower inflation rates, how should we adjust our coping strategies—are there some that should be entirely done away with depending on rate of inflation, and others that should only be modified? Are there things we could do about inflation but should not? If inflation continues at the current rate, is it possible that it will eventually force us to reconsider radically the way we think about collections and collection development in general, and is it possible that such reconsideration could end by offering a net gain to library patrons? If so, how—and what might the gains be? If not, what is the worst-case scenario?

*Exponentially increasing complexity of the serials marketplace.* One of the problems we face in the current information environment is the flipside of one of the benefits it offers: the fact that we now have multiple choices where we previously had few or none. As vendors compete with each other to offer more and more different pricing and acquisition models, as we embrace and reject package deals, and as we join and detach ourselves from consortia, purchasing options continue to multiply much more quickly than we have time even to hear about them, let alone absorb and understand them. To some degree this complexity can be salutary (if our patrons are better off for having all these new choices), although it also acts as an essentially inflationary drain on our limited budget of staff time and morale. Are there things we can do to reduce the complexity of the marketplace? Are there things we could do but should not? (Are there things we are doing in this regard, and should stop doing?)

On balance, does this characteristic of the current marketplace generally benefit or hurt our patrons, and why?

*Open Access.* Is Open Access the wave of the future? Should we want it to be? How has its emergence as a factor in the scholarly information marketplace affected libraries, patrons, and the information economy as a whole? Has its effect been exaggerated? Has it been underestimated? Clearly there will be some amount of some form of Open Access in the future—but how much will there be, and what kind? What are the possible scenarios, and the pros and cons of each? (Those who see only pros or only cons are welcome to contribute, but will probably find themselves frustrated with me as an editor.) In an online publishing environment that contains a mixture of toll-access and Open Access publishing, what do impact factors mean?

*The Big Deal.* Few acquisition models have aroused as much controversy as the Big Deal (whereby a publisher offers online access to its entire journal list at a package price, usually requiring the participating library to retain all individual subscriptions it held at the time it entered into the Big Deal, among other constraints). Is this arrangement here to stay, or are the recent high-profile defections from the fold of Big Deal participants a harbinger of its inevitable doom? On balance, is the Big Deal good for us or bad for us? And who is the “us”—librarians or patrons? Is it possible that it could be good for patrons but bad for libraries, and if so, how?

*Collection development in the online environment.* The current information environment poses serious and fundamental questions about the meaning of collection development—indeed, about the very meaning of the word “collection.” When information was primarily provided in print formats and was therefore difficult to locate and expensive to transport, and when it moved with painful slowness from place to place, the only way a library could serve its patrons’ needs well was to anticipate those needs as thoroughly as possible (If patrons showed up at the library and the library didn’t have what they needed, there were no really effective methods for meeting their frustrated needs in a timely way). Of course, our ability to anticipate patrons’ needs was always far from perfect, which meant that we frequently bought the wrong things and failed to buy the right things. Today, information is easy to locate and access to it can be obtained almost instantly. Does this mean that the permanent, “just-in-case” collection is obsolete? Do we need to keep trying to guess what our patrons are going to need, or is it now possible to respond to their actual needs instantly? Does the current environment allow for a deeper bifurcation between large, monumental research libraries that

serve as cultural archives and leaner, more real-time-oriented libraries that focus more intently on the immediate research needs of their individual user communities?

*Subscription model.* Some librarians feel that the serials inflation crisis is, at least in part, a structural problem—a function of the subscription model itself—and that the subscription model no longer serves libraries and their patrons well. Is that so? Can the pricing problem be separated from the structural one? (In other words, if all journal subscriptions cost \$5 per year and inflation were less than 1% annually, would some of us still say that the subscription model doesn't work?) Assuming that the subscription model itself is still a basically functional one today, does it have a future, or will the prevalence of online access eventually make the blanket acquisition of journal and periodical content by title unnecessary? Has it done so already? Assuming that the subscription model is, itself, no longer tenable, what model(s) can or should take its place?

*Serials work as public service.* What is the ultimate purpose of serials acquisition—to build a collection or to serve the patron? If both, then how do we balance the two interests when they conflict, as they inevitably will? (In other words, there is always some tension between access and control. Discuss.) What are some ways to promote a more patron-centered approach to the acquisition and management of serials resources? *Does* our approach really need to be more patron centered, or is that a red-herring issue?

*Acquisitions processes and the OPAC.* Is there any hope for the OPAC, or should it be hastened to a quick and clean death by whatever means necessary, so that we can free up huge amounts of staff time and something better can be put in its place? The relevance of this question to acquisitions and collection development practices is indirect, but real: The OPAC exists to document a collection. If there is no collection, what kind of finding tool is needed? If we change fundamentally the way that we acquire information access on our patrons' behalf, how will the finding tools we give them lead them to the things we're acquiring? Will there, in fact, be any difference or separation between the finding process and the provision of the information itself? In a purely (or mostly) patron-driven collection development process, assuming that such is possible and desirable, what would be the role of the cataloger? Of the bibliographer or subject specialist? Of the serials manager? Of the acquisitions coordinator?

*Serials cataloging and its implications for the acquisitions process.* Let's be honest: Patrons don't care what titles we subscribe to. They care what articles are available. A journal subscription doesn't give them

the information they need—an article does. So if we were serious about serials cataloging, wouldn't we be cataloging articles instead of journal titles? And suppose we did: What effect would that have on the acquisitions process for serials? Does this relate back to the earlier question about the ongoing viability of the subscription model and just-in-case/just-in-time collection development?

*Vendor relations.* Working effectively and productively with vendors, agents, and publishers has always been a special challenge; not necessarily an unpleasant one, but one that requires skills that are not generally taught in library school. The deepening complexity of the serials marketplace has only made the challenge greater. Keeping track of new pricing structures; monitoring journals and databases for pricing anomalies; negotiating license agreements; organizing and maintaining consortial relationships; tracking changes in package and database content; monitoring usage, and translating usage data into policy decisions—these are all new skills for many of us, and there is no reason to believe that the issues will get simpler or the tasks less demanding in the future. Questions we should be asking ourselves (and that would make excellent essay topics) include these: How do you determine whether it's worthwhile to work with a consortium? Do we still need subscription agents? What's a reasonable price for a science journal? A humanities journal? How do you deal with scam vendors? What are some good (and bad) techniques of license negotiation? Why don't we negotiate prices more often, and what if we did? To what degree should we cultivate close relationships with vendors and publishers, and to what degree are such relationships dangerous? When is it appropriate (or inappropriate) to accept honoraria, advisory-board memberships, consulting fees, dinners?

*Staff time.* The real cost of staff time is an issue that, I believe, has not received sufficient attention in the professional literature, and this column seems like an excellent forum in which to address it. Are there good models available to determine the actual value of staff time? If not, how might we develop one? Once we know what staff time is really worth, what implications will that knowledge have for the ways we prioritize and distribute tasks? Are there tasks that might fall away entirely because their worth is completely out of proportion to the cost of carrying them out?

The given list is not meant to be an exhaustive one, of course—I'm open to any and all suggestions and proposals from prospective authors, or even from those who aren't interested in writing themselves but would like to see a particular issue addressed. When submitting proposals, however,

please bear in mind that I won't be particularly interested in essays that raise questions or problems without suggesting answers or solutions (in other words, essays like this one). Polemics will be welcome, but tirades or rants that rely more on emotional rhetoric than on logical thinking are unlikely to be accepted. Nor am I particularly interested in "how we done it good" articles—though I'd be *very* interested in "how we done it bad" articles. You think I'm joking? Think again. Imagine how much we could all learn from an essay that says "Here's an experiment we tried in my library. Here's how it failed, and here's what we learned from the experience." More essays along those lines would make for a much more lively—and, I think a much more useful—serials literature.

In fact, those two terms—"lively" and "useful"—are the ones that I hope the readers of *The Serials Librarian* will find themselves using to describe this column in the future. I invite any and all interested in helping create such a column to contact me with your ideas, thoughts and proposals.