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Online Serials Heat Up

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Online Serials Heat Up

SERIALS LIBRARIANSHIP is hot. It wasn't too long ago that library schools were eliminating serials management courses while libraries were merging serials departments into acquisitions and cataloging. Now, in the era of electronic journals and magazines, serials is the hottest topic in the library.

Patrons are using more e-serials than ever because of the convenience of desktop access. Librarians are busy negotiating complex online licenses. Many parties are looking for the best way to create affordable and desirable electronic serials publications. Conferences on serials issues now draw international crowds of librarians, publishers, vendors, and end users in an atmosphere where common problems can be openly discussed.

The United Kingdom Serials Group (UKSG) is not a new organization. The Charleston Conference, which focuses on the collection development of both books and serials, also has a history of nearly 20 years. These annual conferences now tackle issues of interest to everyone in the library and publishing fields. They are on the cutting edge as they bring librarians and publishers together to improve electronic access and explore alternatives to traditional journal publishing models.

UKSG

UKSG (www.uksg.org) was founded in 1978 and has built a reputation as an active organization that fosters communication among librarians, publishers, and other interested parties on mutual solutions to problems facing creators, readers, and purchasers of serials. This continent has a parallel organization in the North American Serials In-

terest Group, whose 2003 conference will be held June 26–29 in Portland, OR. UKSG also publishes the print and electronic journal *Serials*, as well as an electronic newsletter. I spoke at UKSG's April 2002 annual meeting at the University of Warwick.

A record 540 delegates from 20 countries attended the meeting. Designed

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to be a balanced conference, it included vendors, for-profit publishers, not-for-profit publishers, librarians, readers, authors, library organizations, and others. An open mind and willingness to listen were paramount.

The first keynote speaker was Sir Brian Follett of the University of Oxford, who emphasized the importance of the peer review system to scholarship and progress. "If we give up peer review, scientists give up their rights to be believed," he said, but electronic publishing can facilitate rather than end peer review. This observation matches the results I've found in surveys of authors and readers—a strong peer review system is an essential part of the scientific process.

Journal model is fine?

The second keynote speaker was Derk Haank, chair of Elsevier Science, who also emphasized that in a time of change we should keep what is good about the old journals system and eliminate what doesn't work. Not surprisingly, Haank believes the "journal model is fine" but that delivery on paper is inefficient. He thinks migration to electronic publishing will not only correct

problems with paper distribution but will allow new features (such as linking and searching) and more content to be added. Electronic publishing does not lower the costs to publishers, but it shifts where the costs occur. According to Haank, electronic publishing has higher fixed and infrastructure costs but lower marginal distribution costs.

Haank highlighted trends throughout e-journal publishing, including portals geared to specialized user groups, the addition of back files so that an entire journal is available online, and full searchability and linking to both current and back file issues.

In terms of price, Haank promised lower price increases, although he didn't go so far as to predict lower overall prices. With e-journals there must be differential pricing based on the size of the organization and amount of use. Owing to price increases, Haank acknowledged that Elsevier Science has lost individual subscribers, the corporate library market, and the teaching college market. Electronic publishing offers "a unique chance to win them back."

SPARC carries on

Julia Blixrud, assistant director of public programs for the Association of Research Libraries SPARC program, was another speaker. Founded just four years ago, SPARC attempts to ignite discussion among authors, readers, and librarians about scholarly publishing alternatives; it funds competitive journals that can be published at a lower cost than many for-profit existing journals. Libraries are then encouraged to subscribe to the new, lower-cost journal while discontinuing the higher-priced established journal.

SPARC has certainly succeeded at its first goal of encouraging discussion and educating faculty, although the second goal of shifting publishing has had less success. University faculty members are unlikely to stop publishing in prominent journals, nor will they agree to cut a subscription just because of cost. Still, SPARC has moved ahead with its efforts to support competitive start-up journals.



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ONLINE DATABASES

A crises in science publishing

Representing the author community, Steven Bachrach, professor in the Department of Chemistry at Trinity University in San Antonio, spoke from his experiences as editor of *The Internet Journal of Chemistry* and as a university scientist. Bachrach believes a crisis exists because scientists read a smaller percent of the research literature than they should as a result of the escalation in journal costs coupled with the increase in the numbers of journals published.

He suggests reevaluating the "publish or perish" culture and rethinking the "least publishable unit" concept—the practice of writing up research in the smallest possible chunks. Bachrach urged authors to reject transferring copyright, support worthy journals by publishing in them, and "think long and hard about starting new journals."

So far, authors' attempts at action haven't been too successful. The Public Library of Science (PLS) manifesto called for authors to boycott journals that do not make articles freely available online six months after publication. Many signatories of PLS continue to publish in the same journals. Bachrach didn't speculate on whether this is because the authors just forgot what they signed, didn't feel they could make the sacrifice, or realized that their proposed model might not be sustainable for all publishers in all disciplines.

What readers value

I presented data from surveys of over 15,000 scientists, social scientists, and engineers in universities and non-university settings. Readers and authors in every discipline value and rely on journals, whether print or electronic. They value features such as peer review, timely publication, and access to both new and older articles.

Although the use of electronic versions still varies widely from discipline to discipline, almost all will adopt peer-reviewed electronic journals that make their work easier and for which the cost is free or subsidized by the library. Some disciplines have readily adopted alternatives to journals, such as e-print archives that include nonrefereed articles, preprints, and postprints of refereed articles. But most disciplines use these for only a small percentage of their total article reading. Physics is a notable ex-

ception, relying on e-prints from arXiv.org for a majority of its readings.

From Charleston to Fiesole

Librarians, publishers, and vendors have been meeting in Charleston, SC, since 1980 to discuss collection development issues. Today the Charleston Conference (www.cofc.edu/cdconference) attracts nearly 600 participants.

The annual meeting is the brainchild of Katina Strauch, head of collection development, College of Charleston Libraries, who also publishes the journal *Against the Grain*. The 2002 Charleston meeting will be held October 30 to November 2 and will include presentations on almost every topic of book and serials collection development, including many on e-serials.

Four years ago the Charleston meeting spread to Europe, when Strauch helped organize a meeting in Fiesole, Italy. In July 2002, the Fourth Fiesole Collection Development Retreat was held in Amsterdam. It was a stimulating event, with the signature mix of librarians, scientists, publishers, and vendors. About 65 people from Europe and the United States attended.

Sessions covered user behavior studies, pricing models, and the role of the library in electronic publishing and distribution. Several speakers said that user behavior varies considerably by subject discipline, motivation of the user, and easy availability of low-cost digital resources.

Libraries are making electronic resources easier to use and more widely available outside the physical library, participants said, but sometimes fail to convey to users that the library and librarian are responsible for providing all of this access. Others discussed a wide variety of pricing models that may shape the future of publishing. Many of the conference presentations are available at digital.casalini.it/retreat/retreat_2002.html.

A variety of viewpoints

Consensus is not necessary at meetings but a variety of viewpoints is. With electronic serials we still have many issues to work out—building more usable systems, devising and accepting technical standards, providing widespread access, and keeping costs and prices under control. Meetings that bring together all players in the scholarly communications chain help everyone bring about solutions to the many unresolved issues.