

How to become a serial killer

One approach to the acquisition and retention of periodicals

by Faye Christenberry, Judith Emde, Sue Hewitt, Cindy Pierard, and Bradley L. Schaffner

"I can't seem to face up to the facts, I'm tense and nervous, and I can't relax . . . You're talkin' a lot, but you're not sayin' anything."

—"Psycho Killer," by The Talking Heads¹

"...yet they still raise our taxes to loot us . . . In such painful tormenting conditions shall we simply fold our arms and wait to die? No absolutely not!"

—"Letter from Abroad," by Ho Chi Minh²

Although written tongue-in-cheek, the title of this article articulates a thought that has crossed the minds of most librarians when dealing with journal subscription renewals. The continued rising cost of periodicals, combined with acquisition budgets that are static or barely keeping pace with inflation, have created a situation in which many academic and research libraries must cancel serials on a regular basis to stay within their allocated budgets.³ The situation at the University of Kansas (KU) Libraries is no exception.

Many subject specialists at the KU Libraries have been forced to cancel periodical titles regularly to ensure that money is available to pay for the remaining titles and to maintain a small fund for the purchase of monographs that are not acquired through approval plans. Serial-dependent disciplines, especially those in the sciences, have been most affected by dramatic increases in subscription costs. Un-

fortunately, it appears that the process of trimming serial titles will become a standard procedure of the libraries' annual budget allocation process.

Serial acquisition and retention guidelines

In recognition of this situation, members of the Collection Management Council (CMC), working with the assistant dean for scholarly communication, recommended that the KU Libraries develop guidelines to assist subject specialists in making periodical acquisition and retention decisions.

The KU Libraries are very fortunate that University Provost David Shulenburg is a leading proponent in national discussions concerning the current challenges facing scholarly communication.⁴ The CMC determined that any serial acquisition and retention guidelines developed for the libraries must transcend the usual discussions of cost versus use, quality of content, specific information needs of the institution, etc., and also reflect an in-depth investigation into the problems plaguing the scholarly communication arena.

The decisions made by librarians to pay for or cancel individual journal titles (or portions thereof) will determine the future cost of information. If we support high-price/high-inflation journals through our subscription and document delivery decisions, we can only expect to see continued high prices, high in-

About the authors

Faye Christenberry is reference librarian, Judith Emde is a science librarian, Sue Hewitt is library report manager, Cindy Pierard is instruction coordinator, and Bradley L. Schaffner is a Slavic Studies librarian at the University of Kansas, e-mail: fchristenberry@ku.edu, jemde@ku.edu, shewitt@ku.edu, cpierard@ku.edu, bschaffn@ku.edu

If we support high-price/high-inflation journals through our subscription and document delivery decisions, we can only expect to see continued high prices, high inflation, and annual journal cancellations.

flation, and annual journal cancellations. While serial cancellations will suffice in the short term, they do not solve the long crisis in scholarly communication. The only long-term solution will be through a fundamental change in the way scholars treat their intellectual property to assure that it is disseminated at the lowest possible cost to the widest relevant audience.

Outlining the issues

Members of the CMC concluded that it was essential to create a public document outlining the issues of scholarly communication as they relate to periodical literature. This document would be available to librarians involved in serial retention projects and to the faculty, students, and other patrons whom the KU Libraries serve. Such a document would help make the serial acquisition and cancellation process more transparent to librarians and patrons alike. The CMC commissioned a task force to complete this charge.

The resulting document consists of three parts, each specifically designed to complement, yet function independently of, one another. The first section entitled "The University of Kansas Libraries Serials Manifesto" outlines the challenges that libraries and universities now face regarding the scholarly communication crisis. Because its purpose is to provide faculty and students with an overview of issues pertaining to scholarly communication, hyperlinks are provided to key resources that discuss these issues in more detail.

Some of these resources include David Shulenburg's "Moving with Dispatch to Resolve the Scholarly Communication Crisis: From Here to Near, October 16, 1998"⁵ and Martha Kyrrilidou's "Journal Costs: Current Trends & Future Scenarios for 2020."⁶

The "Serials Manifesto" also provides links to initiatives designed to promote and improve new methods of scholarly communication, including BioOne,⁷ The Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC),⁸ and the ARL/ACRL/SPARC partnership, Create Change.⁹

The second section of the document, "Considerations for Journal Acquisition and Retention: Cost, Quality, and Related Factors," provides a more in-depth examination of the cost crisis in scholarly communication and introduces related questions that should be considered in serial acquisition and cancellation decisions.¹⁰ Specific questions include:

- What weight should be given to the price history of a title?
- Under what conditions should the libraries give preference in their subscription choices to publications of scholarly societies or university presses?
- If a strategic competitor were published under the sponsorship of SPARC or a similar alliance, what circumstances would justify retention of the original, for-profit title?

Although the decision to acquire, retain, or cancel a serial title cannot be based solely on subscription costs, skyrocketing increases in the price of many academic journals is a primary indicator that the current scholarly communication model does not work as effectively as it should.¹¹ "Considerations for Journal Acquisition and Retention" and the "Serials Manifesto" are available to the public on the University of Kansas Libraries' Web site.

The final section of the document is a serial acquisition and retention checklist, which includes references to reports made available to KU subject specialists. There was no consensus as to whether this section of the document should be placed on a public Web site. Issues were raised about the value of providing detailed information that would not make sense to the nonspecialist. Also, many teaching faculty members are already inundated with information regarding serials retention, and this list could potentially confuse the issue further.

The advantage of placing the list on a publicly accessible Web site is that the checklist clearly illustrates the decision-making process involved in the acquisition and retention of serial titles. The task force recommended to the assistant dean for scholarly communication that this section be placed on the librar-

ies' staff Intranet with the understanding that subject specialists would be free to distribute the checklist to interested parties. This section concludes with a list of reports that are available to assist subject specialists in their decision-making process.¹²

Conclusion

This article provides an overview of the issues that academic and research libraries now face regarding scholarly communication and shares one library's approach to incorporating consideration of these issues into daily practices regarding journal acquisitions and cancellations. The document does not provide any major new breakthroughs regarding the scholarly communication crisis. However, it does offer a succinct summary of the issues for the nonspecialist, and it marks an important step towards providing a systematic, transparent approach for the acquisition and retention of periodicals at the KU Libraries.

By making this information publicly accessible, it is the authors' belief that this document will help library staff and users to make more informed decisions when selecting titles and to raise awareness of the need to identify and pursue alternatives to the current publishing model when available.

Notes

1. David Byrne, et al, "Psycho Killer" on *Stop Making Sense*, Talking Heads (New York: Sire, 1984).

2. Robert Templer, *Shadows and Wind: A View of Modern Vietnam* (New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1998): 96.

3. Joseph J. Branin and Mary M. Case, "Reforming Scholarly Publishing in the Sciences: A Librarian Perspective," *Notices of the American Mathematical Society* 45 (April 1998): 477. Also available at <http://www.ams.org/notices/199804/branin.pdf>. [PDF File]. Although focused on scientific publishing, the article provides an excellent overview of the issues of scholarly communication.

4. Some of David Shulenburg's presentations on scholarly communication include "The Faculty/Staff Convocation Speech 1997," on the Web at <http://www.ku.edu/~provost/convocation97.shtml> and "Moving with Dispatch to Resolve the Scholarly Communication Crisis: From Here to Near," presented October

16, 1998, available at <http://www.ku.edu/~provost/arl.shtml>.

5. <http://www.ku.edu/~provost/arl.shtml>.

6. <http://www.arl.org/newsltr/210/costs.html>.

7. <http://www.bioone.org>.

8. <http://www.arl.org/sparc>.

9. <http://www.createchange.org>.

10. A number of institutions and libraries have conducted price studies of journals. The Association of Research Libraries has compiled an excellent group of these reports at <http://www.arl.org/scomm/resources.html>.

11. For data on collection budgets and how they are being affected (serial cancellations information, ration of budget going to serials/monographs), see: Robert Sewell, *Library Materials Budget Survey, 1999-2000*, available at <http://www.arl.org/scomm/lmbs/lmbs2000.html>. Also see: Martha Kyrillidou, "Research Library Spending on Electronic Scholarly Information is on the Rise." *ARL Bi-Monthly Report*. 213, available at <http://www.arl.org/newsltr/213/spend.html>.

12. The University of Kansas Libraries document is available on the Web at <http://www2.lib.ukans.edu/scholcomm/sercan01/Sertsfcf.htm>. ■

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