

The Newsletter on Serials Pricing Issues: An Electronic Publication

I. Electronic publications: Background

Every few days I see an Internet message announcing a new electronic publication or discussion group, and many of these are of potential interest to librarians. Although there are unresolved problems with electronic serials, their number is growing quickly. In July 1991 the Association of Research Libraries (equivalent in North America to SCONUL) issues a directory of electronic journals, newsletters, and discussion groups that listed "over 500 scholarly lists, about 30 journals, over 60 newsletters, and 15 'other' titles including some newsletter-digests."⁽¹⁾ So quickly have these publications been increasing that, less than one year later, ARL has published a second edition, half again as large.

The electronic serials of the late 1980s and 1990s are not the first. At least two experimental electronic journal projects were launched a decade ago, one in the UK and one in the US. The 1982 UK Serials Group Conference heard a presentation on BLEND, the Birmingham and Loughborough Electronic Network Development, which introduced an online journal that had grown out of the computer conferencing of a group of British scientists. An American counterpart was based at the New Jersey Institute of Technology and named the Electronic Information Exchange System. According to Anne B. Piternick these projects were inspired by F.W. Lancaster's book *Toward Paperless Information*, published in 1978.⁽²⁾ Both projects were discontinued after the trial period. They failed for a number of reasons,

some of them still troubling us today, but primarily they were not generally accessible by their intended audience. Authors wanted their work to be read, not hidden away in a mainframe computer, so they were reluctant to publish in any but traditional paper journals.

At just about the time the BLEND and EIES projects ended, the micro-computer began to revolutionize the work of researchers and librarians. With hardware prices falling rapidly, a reasonably-priced personal computer and modem enabled one to communicate with the world through networks such as BITNET and JANET, fertile ground for electronic publications. The *Newsletter on Serials Pricing Issues* is an example of today's "e-serials."

II. Newsletter on Serials Pricing Issues as a Case Study

People who are fond of initialisms call it NOPSI or the unpronounceable NSPI; I don't like initialisms, so I call it "the Newsletter."

First, what it is and what it is not. The Newsletter is just that: a serial reporting news on a specific topic. It is not a journal; it is not a discussion group; it will never be either of these forms of communication. The Newsletter's mission is to report current news on serials pricing. We DO interpret "pricing" broadly and include news of electronic publishing, conference reports, and accounts of meetings that may be marginally related to pricing. The Newsletter has an editorial board, but it is not refereed. Some readers have suggested that this be done; however, the Newsletter will not become a refereed journal, for that

is not its purpose. Perhaps a refereed electronic journal on the broader topic of serials in general will appear some day, but I have heard of no plans for one.

The *Newsletter on Serials Pricing Issues* began as a committee publication of one of the divisions of the American Library Association. I will avoid initialisms again and say that I was asked to chair a committee whose charge was the following: to gather and disseminate statistics and other data on the rising costs of journals to libraries; reduce duplication of effort among persons and institutions studying the impact on their collections of unprecedented serials price increases; identify trends in serials pricing; and determine what additional data need to be gathered. The subcommittee acted as a clearing-house for information about serials pricing: news, studies, questions, and other concerns.(3)

At its first meeting in July 1988, the group decided to publish a newsletter. We kept talking and decided to make that an electronic newsletter that also had a paper edition. Quite frankly, we didn't know what we were getting into; none of us had more than minimal experience with electronic mail. We planned and we publicized, and I learned how to use BITNET; at the end of February 1989 we produced our first issue. It was around 500 lines (or nine pages), long for an e-mail message. About fifty people had subscribed to the electronic edition, and about twice that many had asked for the paper version. Subcommittee members were delighted with the response. In order to distribute the electronic copies of that first issue, I chained together subscriber addresses and used a nickname. As new people subscribed, this procedure became very awkward. Soon I began to work with the local e-mail postmaster, who put my list on a mailserver on one of the campus mainframes. Distribution got a lot easier.

From the beginning the Newsletter has been a success with lively readers, many of them e-mail novices themselves, responding

with editorial material. We print a few actual articles, but the bulk of the Newsletter's content is brief notices: questions, complaints, solutions. Most of the submissions come by electronic mail now; a change from the first year. We try to stay away from "publisher bashing", although we do not hesitate to print letters and reports concerning excessive rates and practices that appear to raise journal prices needlessly. Subscription agents have not been exempt from our readers' questioning. Although we were not the first electronic publication to print what has come to be known as the "Princeton Letter", we are the only one that I know of to follow up with comment from librarians, vendors, and publishers. Such discussion is a favourite of our readers.

In the beginning, I rekeyed even electronic messages; I did not know how to log and download these communications, so I printed them. Now, making up an issue goes much faster, because I log all the messages into an electronic notebook, download it to my word processor, and edit online. Then I insert each message or article into its place in the issue.

Online distribution used to be on three networks: BITNET/Internet, Faxon's DataLinx, and ALANET — the now-defunct network of ALA. We had hoped EBSCO could distribute the Newsletter electronically on EBSCO-NET, but this was not feasible, so EBSCO sends paper copies to customers. Later, Readmore became our third subscription agent distributor, sending a paper edition enhanced by desktop publishing to any of its customers who want it. Most recently Blackwell's Periodicals Division has made the Newsletter available online to subscribers of CONNECT.

The original paper edition lasted only a short time because of the expense of photocopying and postage. The subcommittee's parent body was not willing to accept more than 200 paper subscribers and finally had to discontinue all financial support. Many of these subscribers changed to the electronic edition.

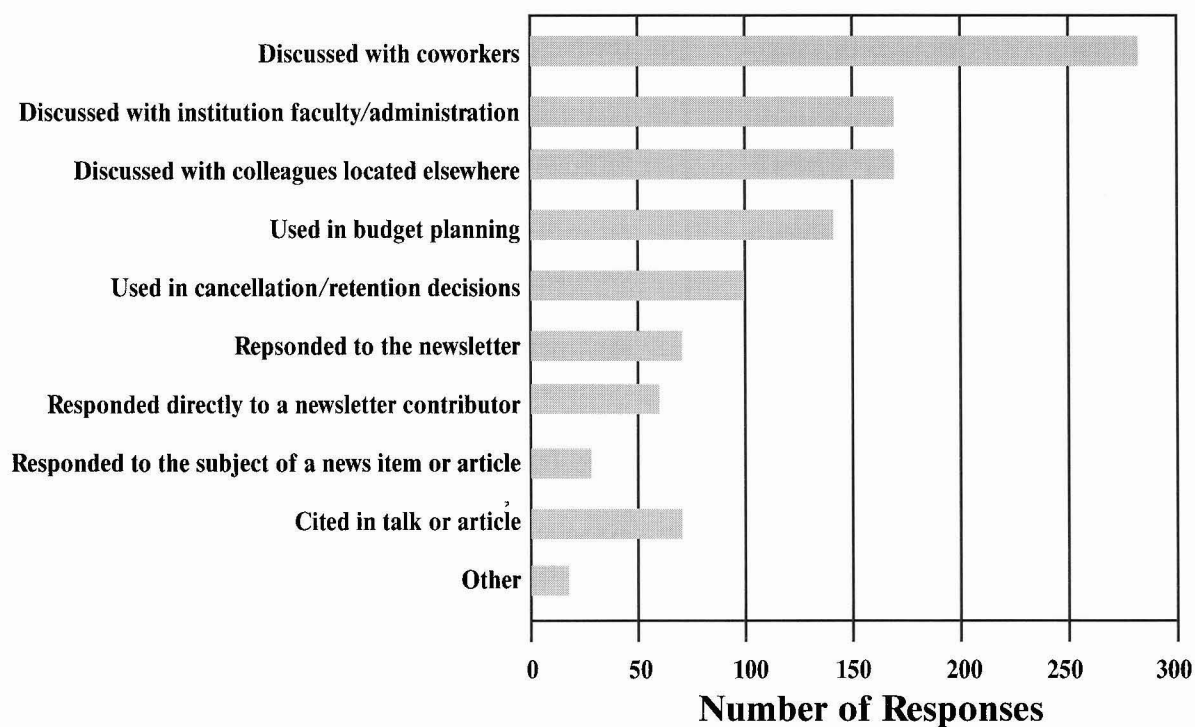
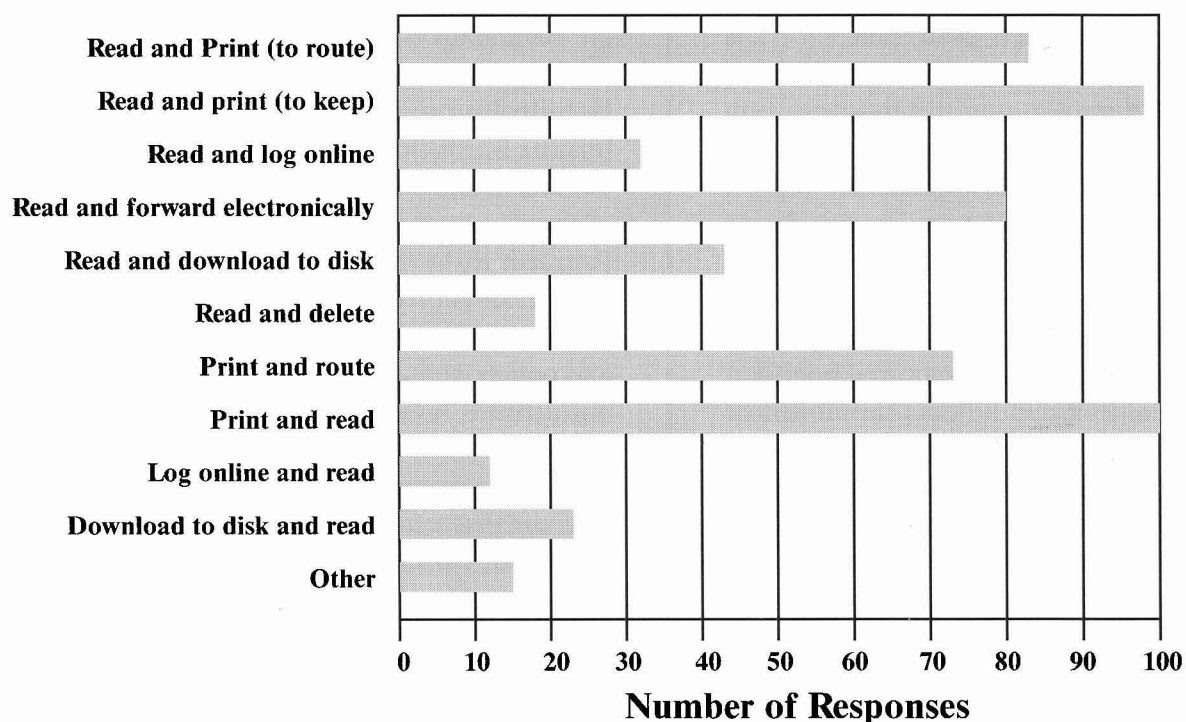
As the Newsletter's success grew, so did problems, especially with the ALA division. In the first place, the subcommittee had not gone through the proper channels to have the publication approved; we had just done it! At the same time it became more and more identified with its editor, rather than with the association. Also, a large proportion of subscribers were not members of ALA or even librarians; our market was also publishers, subscription agents, educational administrators, and scholars. Finally, in April 1991, after an extended period of tension (including my being informed of a title change!), I separated the Newsletter from the association to continue it independently. The former sponsoring group then began its own electronic newsletter.

As electronic discussion groups had proliferated, I had become concerned about the timeliness of the information I was distributing. What had been very fast in 1989 seemed far less so in 1991. In particular, a discussion group called SERIALST(4) was disseminating news about serials almost instantaneously, whereas I had to hold it for up to three weeks. Although Birdie MacLennan, the editor, asked people not to send pricing messages to SERIALST, that was a great temptation because of its immediacy. I considered starting a discussion group for pricing news only, but my editorial board advised against it and I didn't have time to moderate. At the same time, Birdie felt the need to edit SERIALST and asked me to help her. It seemed right at that time to expand the scope of SERIALST to include pricing news, with my having the right to reproduce what was appropriate in the Newsletter. This effort was welcomed by subscribers, but it has not been without its rough spots; we're both independent women and we both love our creations. Technical problems have been frustrating for us, and they continue. But overall, the association has been beneficial for both products and women.

Distribution problems have been a part of the Newsletter from the beginning. It took several months to connect with ALANET, and now it is gone. Many of those readers have sent new e-mail addresses. The Faxon electronic edition on DataLinx had to be rekeyed for each issue, and it was taking far too long for only thirty or so recipients. I discontinued that in 1991, and Faxon now send paper copies to those former subscribers who do not have BITNET access.

By far the greatest problems and the greatest number of problems have been associated with the original BITNET/Internet system and the software used at my university. There appear to be networks and specific nodes that I simply cannot talk to. At the start I began the practice of sending a test message to every new subscriber and added the address to the mailing list only when the person verified that the test message had arrived. At the same time, word got around (and surprised me!) that one could self-subscribe by sending a message to the local listserver. Usually this caused no serious problems, but one address caused a loop that we were not able to break before all subscribers had received at least five copies of one issue. People react in various ways to something like this. Hundreds of subscribers sent me messages telling me how many copies they had gotten, some of them each time a new one arrived! A few got angry and continue to get angry every time something out of the ordinary happens. I usually apologize in the next newsletter and try to explain what happened, but I hate to keep apologizing! I'd rather comment on serials prices.

Another serious problem occurred when we switched maintenance of the mailing list from the postmaster to me. I got a copy of the list and practised editing it. Then, when I was ready, I told him that I would take over. The next few issues that went out had an unusual number of copies returned as undeliverable. There are always some, but these had been sent to addresses that I had

Figure 1 *What action have you taken in response to information in the newsletter?***Figure 2** *What do you usually do with issues of the newsletter?*

deleted from the list. I realized that new subscribers were not receiving their copies, because the Newsletter was going to the old list. Three times the postmaster told me he had fixed the problem, and three times nothing changed. Finally, when I threatened to take the Newsletter to another university, he made the adjustment.

But all was not as it should be, as I discovered about six months later. While I was adding new subscribers who contacted me, the listserver was adding new self-subscribers. And not telling me. Because that mailing list was no longer the one used for distribution, none of these 75 new subscribers received anything. I discovered this situation by accident when I asked for a copy of the mailing list, just to be sure everything was all right. What a surprise! I added the new addresses to the list without test messages. As you might guess, the address that had caused the loop in May was one of the new subscribers, and we had to go through THAT problem again.

Enough of problems! Most people understand that the technology is still evolving and that human beings make mistakes. The rewards are far greater than the problems. The Newsletter is filling a need for its readers. Serials pricing continues to be a serious problem for libraries, and it affects scholars, publishers, and vendors as well. Electronic mail has become, at least for me, the primary means of communicating with colleagues. I don't believe I have to explain its advantages in most cases over letters and often over the telephone. I feel as if I have 1,022 new friends! Electronic mail is informal, and new correspondents become chatty very quickly. Of course, there are well-known hazards in this, but they come into play only occasionally.

In early 1992 I sent a brief questionnaire to subscribers, in order to find out what they do with the actual newsletter, how they respond to its content, and how many people see their copy. About 300 of 951 replied, most giving multiple answers to the first two questions. Here is what they said.

What do people do with the Newsletter?

(Figure 1) Few respondents said they did not read the Newsletter, and most of those were systems or other library personnel who received the issues for the purpose of putting them on a LAN or forwarding them to others who did read them. I wanted to get a feel for whether subscribers read electronic material online or printed first and then read. Significantly more claimed to read before they printed or routed.

How do People use Newsletter Information?

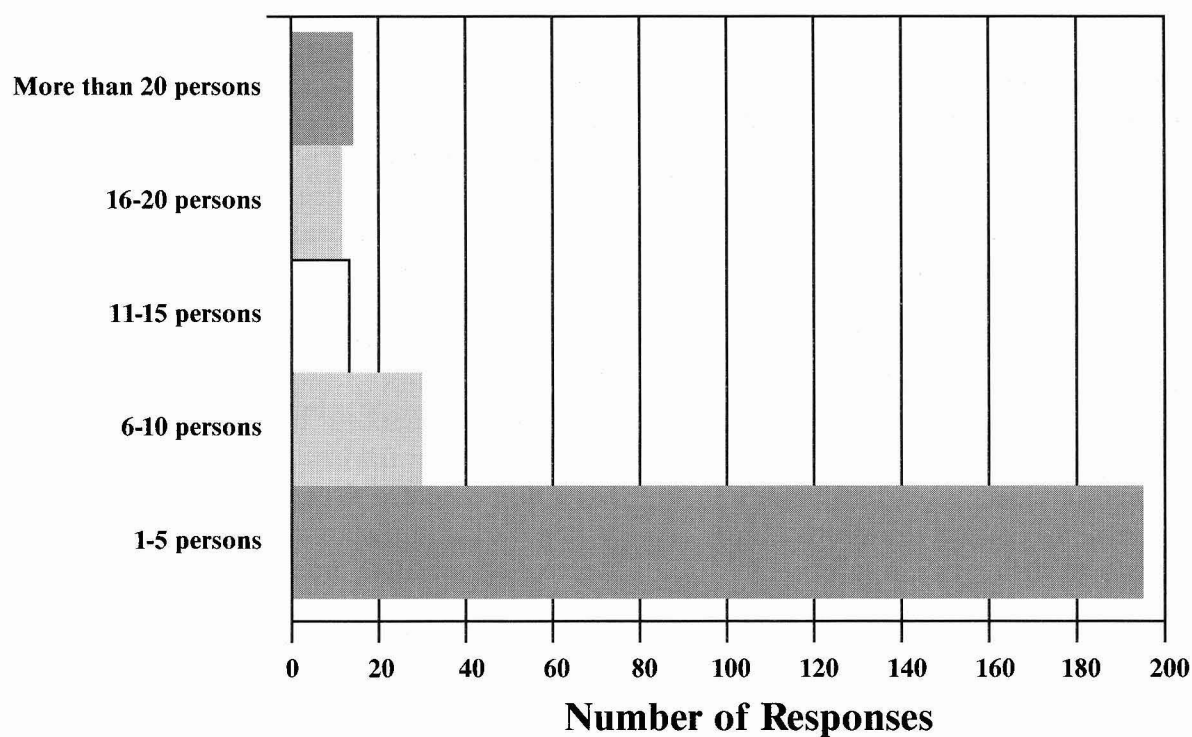
(Figure 2) Answers to the question about action taken in response to the information in the Newsletter fell into three categories. Most discussed it with co-workers, others within the institution, and colleagues elsewhere, in descending order. Many used the pricing information in budget planning and cancellation/retention decisions, one of our primary goals. A good number had actively responded to items by sending messages either to the Newsletter or to a contributor, or by contacting the subject of a news item or article. Still others had cited pricing news or the Newsletter itself in a talk or article.

How Many People See the Newsletter?

(Figure 3) About 80 percent of recipients shared or forwarded their copy of the Newsletter, most with five or fewer persons. Responses to this question give an indication of the true readership of the publication. Not included in these figures are Readmore's 400 paper copies or more than 100 from EBSCO.

Who are the Subscribers?

(Figure 4) Distribution of questionnaire respondents is probably about the same as that of the subscriber list. About 80 percent of those returning the questionnaire were librarians, followed by non-librarian academics and publishers, then subscription agents and students. Among those receiving paper copies of the Newsletter from the various sources are a good many more agents and publishers.

Figure 3 *How many others see your copy of the newsletter?***Figure 4** **Occupation**

250	Librarian
13	Faculty member/researcher/ administration (nonlibrarian)
5	Subscription agent
11	Publisher
3	Student
4	Other

The questionnaire had ample opportunity for comments, and the additional remarks were very helpful both in documenting that the Newsletter is serving its purpose and in advising the editorial board as to future topics, formatting changes, and the like. I had hoped for a better than 30 percent response rate, but it would have been difficult to handle all the messages had this occurred. A future issue of the Newsletter will discuss the responses and the comments in detail.

III. Future of Electronic Serials

I foresee both positive and negative factors for electronic serials. We'll do the negative first and get them out of the way.

Electronic publication of scholarly research is not yet accepted by administrators of the academic reward system. A scholar publishing in an electronic journal, even a refereed electronic journal, does not find that work treated with the same respect as work published in a paper journal. Although more and more scholars are active on the networks, there is still a concern about lack of access to electronic articles. Being so involved myself, I tend to assume that the rest of the academic and professional world is the same, but apparently this is not true. My assumption, based on the growth of the last three years, is that time will take care of this situation — probably.

Perhaps a more serious concern is the likelihood of someone's tampering with electronic text. People ask, "What is the real article? How do I know that the version I have is what the author wrote?" The possibility exists for damage and distortion, but a solution is proposed by some. The creation of a system of archiving electronic publications would almost certainly resolve the question of tampering with texts. There is much concern about archiving, resulting in unnecessary retention of electronic text. No one has yet taken responsibility for

storing the "real" versions of articles published electronically. Serials are often stored on the editors' local listservers and are accessible to individuals upon request, but institutional computing centres are not likely to retain them for extended periods of time. It seems reasonable to expect that when an electronic serial ceases publication, the back file will no longer be available from the source. Commercial publishers will eventually launch electronic journals. How will they be preserved? A growing number of persons and groups believe that the library is the logical place for archives of electronic serials.

However, judging from discussions at ALA in January, most of our libraries have not decided how — or whether — we are going to make electronic serials available to our patrons. A few, such as Virginia Tech and Ohio State, have studied and resolved this question. First we must determine the library's means of offering electronic publications. Then we can face the question of archiving.

The final negative is the question of cost. Virtually all electronic serials are available without subscription charge, but that does not mean there is no cost. They are labours of love for the editors. If I had not purchased a computer and a modem, and if my library had not done the same, I could neither receive nor publish an electronic serial. We acquire e-journals through the networks. For those of us in academic institutions, the institution pays to belong to the network and usually gives individuals free access for electronic mail. How long will this be true? What is the cost of electronic communication likely to be in the future, when electronic serials are available commercially? In the US we are planning for the NREN, the National Research and Education Network, a fiber optic system that will accommodate all our electronic communication requirements. Will my university, currently trying to survive a recession economy, always pay the cost of my publishing and subscribing? I assume not.

Turning to the positive side, we are able to take advantage of a mushrooming communication network with almost instantaneous connection. I enjoy getting messages from new subscribers who say something like, "I am new at e-mail; this is my first message. Please let me know if you got it." A little over three years ago I was in the same situation. It doesn't take long.

Libraries are beginning to make electronic serials available to their users. Some mount the complete text on a LAN, and some only direct one how to subscribe and/or access back issues on the network. The cost of , computer disk space is coming down, and it's a good thing! It is not just the network that is mushrooming; it is also the quantity of high-quality electronic refereed research results that are worthy of retention.

Standard periodical indexes have not included articles in electronic journals, and access to bibliographic details has been a problem. Marilyn Geller, a serials librarian at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has just begun to publish the electronic *Citations for Serial Literature*, which lists the contents of several publications, including the Newsletter. She hopes to expand the number of titles indexed. The editors of the *MLA Bibliography* recently agreed to index the refereed electronic journal *Postmodern Culture*, although rumor has it that PMC must send MLA a paper copy. There are other such efforts already, and there will be more in the future.

Finally, I want to mention online discussion groups such as SERIALST. We are talking to each other — internationally — as never before. For years we have complained of how little time we have to "discuss" when we see each other at conferences. The discussion groups have eased our frustration significantly. In addition, when we do meet in person, we

don't have to start at the beginning. We already know each other through our electronic conversations.

Now, there are discussion groups and discussion groups; moderated and unmoderated groups. I belong to three; two moderated and one free-for-all. I don't have to tell you which is the least useful. The hand of the group moderator should not be intrusive, but it should be there. Not only does this practice weed out subscribe/unsubscribe messages sent to the wrong address, but it cuts off inadvertent personal communications, some of which can be embarrassing to sender and subject.

The wonderful thing is that this is just the beginning. The oldest electronic publications and discussion groups are only three to four years old. The advances in technology — and in communication — have been truly amazing. I am pleased and honoured to have had a part in their development through the *Newsletter on Serials Pricing Issues*.

References

1. Ann Okerson. "ARL Directory to Meet Need for Catalog of Electronic Publication." *Newsletter on Serials Pricing Issues* NS 4 (June 25, 1991). Electronic publication available from TUTTLE@UNC.BITNET.
2. Anne B. Piternick. "Serials and New Technology: The State of the 'Electronic Journal.'" *Canadian Library Journal* 46 (1989), 93.
3. "Editor's Introduction." *Newsletter on Serials Pricing Issues*. No. 1 (February 27, 1989). Electronic publication available from TUTTLE@UNC.BITNET.
4. To subscribe to SERIALST, send a message to
LISTSERV@UVMVM.BITNET:
subscribe serialist.