

EXPLOITING YOUR SERIALS: PERSPECTIVES FROM A NEW LIBRARY

Peter Stubley

Paper presented at the UKSG 19th Annual Conference, April 1996, Keele

The paper begins with a discussion of the reasons for exploitation of a serials collection, to some extent questions the need for this in the current economic climate and touches on the importance of 'atmospherics' in the marketing mix. The method used for display of serials at the new St George's Library at the University of Sheffield is then discussed, where the use of serials was incorporated into the architects' brief. The paper concludes with a short discussion of the possibilities and difficulties for display in electronic journals.

*Peter Stubley is Sub-Librarian, The University of Sheffield, St George's Library, Mappin Street, Sheffield S1 4DT
p.stubley@sheffield.ac.uk*

Introduction

I was invited to present this paper by a member of the Organising Committee after he had visited St George's Library at Sheffield University and been particularly impressed by the method we had chosen to display serials. Hence the title. At the same time I really did wonder if I would have anything new to say to you about the exploitation of serials that had not been said either in the professional literature or at previous conferences. What may be different in my approach is a consideration of serials display associated with library design. But before discussing the topic on which I was invited to speak, I would like to broaden out to consider what I think we mean by the exploitation of serials.

Exploitation of serials

The dictionary definitions (Hanks, 1979)¹ of 'exploit' bring back one's fears about using this type of terminology in a library context:

- i) a notable deed or feat, esp. one that is noble or heroic
- ii) to take advantage of (a person, situation, etc) esp. unethically or unjustly for one's own advantage
- iii) to make best use of

With iii) above we can identify with a definition that fits our purpose and one that might be extended into the library arena, specifically in relation to serials:

to make best use of: to ensure that the significant expenditure by our library on serials, in the face of constantly rising prices and falling library budgets, is utilised as efficiently and effectively as possible, and to the fullest advantage of all members of the organisation.

How are serials exploited in organisations? I am thinking here about higher education but some of the points, at least, will apply to other organisations. It seems to me that libraries have the potential for exploiting serials in the following ways:

- current awareness services eg: distribution of photocopied contents pages;
- profiling, a specific version of current awareness services directed at individuals (formerly known as SDI);
- display;
- publications: subject lists of journals, journals list;
- cataloguing: integrating serials information into the 'book' catalogue;
- indirectly, via ILL statistics, ie: a journal purchased as a result of high ILLs would almost certainly be heavily used, giving rise to its own exploitation.

At the same time one must be aware of expressed needs versus unexpressed needs in relation to serials use. Expressed needs are those identified by academics (in particular and as opposed to students) as being essential to the smooth running of their courses on the one hand and the uninterrupted progress of their research on the other. Course needs will, by and large, be expressed in the form of reading list material (essential and background), while research will primarily be driven by the imperatives of the research assessment exercise, backed up by elements such as citation counts and journal impact factors. The point about these teaching and research needs is that they are represented substantially - though admittedly not exclusively - in serials subscribed to by the institutional library which in this regard do not require exploitation in the same way as would, for example, a new, unknown service.

Thus, if the expressed needs are satisfied via serials subscriptions, it is only those unexpressed needs that need to be targeted in any exploitation campaign. To begin this exercise one must have an understanding of those serials subscriptions that are under-used. The question can also be asked in cost terms. Given the impact that serials inflation and reducing budgets have had on library purchasing power over the past five to ten years, can any academic library in the UK still be subscribing to peripheral rather than essential titles? The days of libraries being able to provide general interest titles to support a

more rounded educational experience disappeared in the early 1980s, interdisciplinary and 'filling-in-the-gaps' journals were cancelled some short time later and now the cuts are starting to be applied to titles in core academic areas. The financial position in which universities are finding themselves this year will further exacerbate this situation and lead to more cancellations. Can there really be serials subscriptions in our institutions that are not paying their way? The problem is then less one of exploitation and more one of selection: which serials will have the greatest impact on our teaching and research?

Of course, it may be argued that exploitation is still required to maximise use but the questions then become: 'How does one define acceptable serial use?', and 'What value represents maximum use?'. The answers will be different for different serials: one would not expect the same use to be made of the *Financial Times* and the *Journal of Accountancy*, though some banding may be possible. In any case, how do we determine serials use? If we estimate that a majority of our serials have reached an acceptable threshold of use, the need for exploitation falls away. In common with product-based industries, there is little need to advertise top selling lines.

Returning to the list of ways of exploiting serials, one can argue that the first two items - current awareness and profiling - are user driven. The librarian is responding to a mix of general and specific user needs and is providing an information and 'convenience' service - provided to the desktop (even in paper form), thus saving academics time in walking to the library - rather than exploiting stock *per se*.

In this scenario, the actual display of the physical entity takes on greater significance in the exploitation stakes. The way in which serials are presented to browsers or even 'passers-by' can actively encourage use, a point emphasised - in reference to services in general - in marketing texts. In discussing the marketing of academic library services, Bellardo and Waldhart² talk of the 'marketing mix' which incorporates the four elements of product design, pricing, communication and distribution. Communication itself comprises

five tools, the last of which is 'atmospherics': efforts to design the place of purchase or use in a way calculated to create specific cognitive or emotional effects in the user or client of the organisation.

"In academic libraries the demeanor and dress of the public service staff, the lighting, ceiling height, furniture, wall graphics and decorations, sounds etc., can contribute greatly to the impression the library creates and therefore how the users are likely to feel and behave."

Issues associated with serials display

Background: St George's Library

The University Library at Sheffield University has a dispersed service and comprises a Main Library, two major branches and a number of smaller service points scattered round the campus. St George's Library is one of the major branches and was opened in January 1992 to provide services to the Faculty of Engineering and from 1994 additionally offered services to Sheffield University Management School. It occupies over 2,000 sq. metres on four floors, has around 300 study seats, space for 66,000 volumes (book equivalents) and subscribes to around 800 journals. It is unusual for a branch library being a completely standalone building, though it does share this space with Blackwell's University Bookshop.

The emphasis in the architects' brief was for the library to 'combine the best features of traditional high quality academic library services with high-tech information technology-based systems'. In addition to flexibility - that byword of all library building design - the other key aspect was the ability to provide the best possible service to library users and, linked to this, the presentation of materials in the most appropriate and appealing manner.

As far as serials are concerned, I am pleased to say that they were specifically mentioned in the brief. In the outline library requirements the need for a 'separate display of the current copy of journals for quick consultation by library users' was mentioned and in the specific section on shelving the following paragraph was included:

"The back issues of journals (some bound, some not) will be likewise shelved in a single open access sequence. Given the large size of bound periodicals these must be shelved on 250mm wide shelving at six shelves per bay. The single, latest copy of all current subscription journals will be displayed in a separate sequence with associated easy chairs."

The final solution was a display area for current copies adjacent to the entrance of the library and a separate sequence of bound and unbound runs on the first floor. The current sequence is displayed on Balmforth display



*Serials display,
St George's
library*

stands, each issue allocated its own sloping panel, angled to present the whole of the front cover to the user. Each stand holds 48 (24 either side) current issues and several stands can be arranged together to produce a very pleasing effect. I should point out here that Balmforth shelving was not used in the rest of the library but was chosen - at the time - as offering the option that most closely matched our needs for serials display. As indicated in the architects' brief a number of easy chairs are available so our users can sit in comfort while leafing through the current issues.

In no way am I suggesting that the St George's Library's approach is the best or only method of presenting serials in an attractive way to users. However, I thought it would be useful to present some of the reasons for taking the path that we did. The main points are:

- observation of serial use;
- a desire to encourage use;
- discrete location;
- ease of use by both users and library staff.

Observation of serial use

In the cramped conditions of our previous accommodation, where current and back issues of serials were bundled on to the shelves wherever there was space, it was clear that the highest demand fell on the current copy of the journal (with the exception of those items that appear on reading lists). This is not a particular novel observation and in these days of endless questionnaires and user surveys could itself be criticised as being unscientific: it is an *observation* not a tested hypothesis. However, this regular demand for the current copy was one of our main reasons for separating these from the back issues. At the same time, a combination of design philosophy and space consideration encouraged us to think of the entrance floor of the library as primarily providing access to quick reference materials. Thus, not only is the demand for the current copy of a journal itself great, but in many cases this can be the sole reason for a user visiting the library, and the ability to enter quickly, browse the issue concerned, and leave, provides a distinct advantage. Hence the association of current journals with other reference materials

(encyclopaedias, dictionaries, handbooks), British Standards, and circulation and enquiry desk services.

A desire to encourage use

This also arose from the complete lack of journal display facilities in our old location, but we were also driven by the desire to utilise the many-varied designs, colours, and shapes of serials to create visual interest and impact in what could otherwise be seen as a rather boring part of the library. The choice of display stands also helped this, for the individual panels, rather than a single continuous shelf, break up the display creating much more spacial interest. This whole combination of journals and display stands then creates its own particular visual impact that encourages users to investigate what is on show.

Discrete location

The creation of a discrete location was considered important both to encourage browsing but also to define the area given over to current serials. By using a different shelving system from the rest of the library (the stands) and bounding the area partially by easy chairs, it was obvious to users what this part of the library was designated for. It also marked the current serials as being different from the back issues and, perhaps most importantly, created a space where all current periodical titles could be browsed easily, to get a rapid overview of the current subscriptions and without the inconvenience and bulk of the back runs.

Ease of use

Godfrey Thompson³ describes the well-known method of allocating storage space behind each issue for immediate back numbers:

"Some methods simply hinge the front flap; more elaborate ones allow the lifted front flap to give back horizontally into a recess, freeing the hands to get to the pile of back issues."

He goes on to state "anyone who has attempted to find back issues in these circumstances knows that the latter system is well worth its extra cost". My response would

be that anyone who has tried any of these systems would be unhappy with the jumble and mess that the current issue hides and would start looking for more effective alternatives on behalf of both library staff and users. What we were looking for was a single issue display panel with no awkward hinged sections to operate and no hidden shelves to use up space and hide clutter, dust and other unmentionables.

Drawbacks in the display system

No display system for serials is perfect, though some of the disadvantages we have experienced at Sheffield may be more to do with our implementation of the approach rather than the approach itself. Overall, the system as described has proved popular and successful and what disadvantages there are relate to:

- labelling
- arrangement of the current serials
- loan policy

Labelling

Four years after moving into the new library I am disappointed to say that the current panels still remain unlabelled. The current serials are placed in order but when one is removed all that is left behind is a plain, unlabelled sheet of metal, with the consequence that, quite often the order becomes much more interesting, though harder to find one's way around, than should be the case. The reason for the lack of labels is easily explained, firstly due to an initial bedding down period, then awaiting the significant changes brought upon us by the move of the Management School and then another bedding down period. It is also the case that there is no placeholder on each panel for adding a serial title or class mark and so labelling tends to be a time-consuming operation and rather permanent as well, requiring the use of sticky tape.

Arrangement of current serials

The decision was taken to arrange the current serials by title, on the basis that, as mentioned above, current serials are used in a different way from many other library materials, and

library users wishing to find a particular title should be able to do so easily, without having to bother with the mystique of class numbers. I still think this was the correct decision but it has given rise to some problems. Firstly, how do you define title without getting involved in long debates about cataloguing rules? For most serials this is clear, but after a while one resorts to rationalisation, prevaricating between 'put it where the user will expect to find it' and a strict adherence to the form of lettering on the cover (or on the title page?!). This difficulty is compounded by the fact that the back runs in St George's Library are in class number order, confusing some users who understandably expect to find them in a title sequence.

Loan policy

For a current display system to make sense, most copies have to be on display most of the time (apart from when they are being used). We thus operate a strict no loan policy for current serials, a feature which has occasionally created conflict with users. This system also means that all current serials have to be stamped - 'current copy' - so that they can be readily identified and repositioned when deposited elsewhere in the library. Of course, this constant visibility means that all titles are easy to find, making them more vulnerable to theft and misuse.

The future: electronic journals

Some may consider that this emphasis on the display of paper is living in the past, for all journals will in time be superseded by their electronic counterparts. While this may eventually be the case, paper versions will continue for some time, but it is also interesting to speculate on what form 'display' of serials will take in an electronic world, or even if an electronic *display* will be really necessary.

One of the earliest indications of a form of the electronic world is provided by the HEFCE pilot licence scheme, and, as an example, the *Ideal* service from Academic Press. This service provides full text in PDF (Portable Document Format) from current and back issues from serials in a range of subject areas. The standard selection method works in typical Web fashion:

- choose a broad subject area (or use the alphabetical listing)
- narrow this down
- choose a title from those displayed
- select a year
- select an issue and browse the contents
- download a paper and view with Adobe Acrobat

Ideal also provides a version of the cover display by making available a colour representation of the title page together with a statement of intent and links to the editorial board, instructions to authors, and subscription information.

It seems to me that this easy yet laborious process works well where the number of serials is relatively small. The *Ideal* database itself covers 178 serials compared with the large numbers subscribed to by academic libraries, and the number of titles in any subject area is also not large. Imagine the above process if one had constantly to move from the contents of a particular title back up the hierarchy and then down again to another serial title, and repeat the process again and again (even with the caching and menu facilities of modern Web browsers). This type of system has the overall disadvantage that its design and structure are publisher driven. There is no easy way of tailoring the system to enable access to all electronic items of interest to one individual, without moving between the services of individual publishers, with all the time that this consumes, and the added disadvantage of the current restricted bandwidth of the Web.

A system such as *Ideal* would seem to be a good starting point for the consideration of electronic journals. It offers elements of current

awareness but its display facilities are limited: what it provides in immediacy, it lacks in overview, though this may be partly a disadvantage of computer display systems themselves. The advantage of the human eye is that, at a glance, it can take in large amounts of information which can be processed easily by the brain. For a screen-based system to be used in a similar way, the designer must resort to thumbnails which the eye cannot readily discern and the brain cannot process. Thus, the display facilities so useful in paper serials will probably have to be adapted in the electronic counterpart. Only experience will tell what the new systems will be and if they will be a modification of the existing browsing technique or a more focused, directed approach to individual titles. One thing seems certain - browsing of current serials will not entail that most important of human requirements: a freshening of the mind by changing one's environment, getting up from a seat, stretching and walking round the display shelves of the library to discover something new.

References

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