How to beat the serials crisis

The State and University Library in Aarhus, Denmark, suffers – like many other large academic libraries – from tight, stagnant budgets as well as mounting shelf space problems. At the same time the library wants to broaden its services to its users and ensure that most of the information that is needed is readily available at the fingertips of the individual student or researcher. This article describes the library's strategy for change and the tools used for making the change possible, as well as very successful.

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Context – a growing crisis

There are a few rock-solid facts in a serials librarian's life: journals increase with a considerable percentage every year; there are more journals out there than ever – due to the pressure to publish; and for most of us, our yearly budgets are decreasing more often than increasing.

The State and University Library was founded by law in 1897 as the second Danish Legal Deposit Library, Centre for the Danish Public Libraries and the University Library for Aarhus University. With so many diverse tasks on our plates, it is no surprise that our stacks – reaching 17 floors above the university and for miles of subterranean rabbit-warrens below – are filled to bursting. New stacks are being built, but these have a finite number of shelves, all reserved for the Danish legal deposit material.

Developing a solution

The hard facts of budgeting and storage problems made it high time to take a very close look at the library's strategy as stated in our contract with the Danish Government. This strategy is to strengthen our digital procurement of text, pictures, and sound on the Internet. Roughly translated: Go online if at all possible!

I took the word 'online' a little bit further and decided to take a closer look at e-only. Not just by cancelling present print journals, but – I am sad to say – discarding older non-Danish print journals. This took quite some consideration from the entire management, as we are fully aware of the archival problems in online publishing. But, as the pressure was on to save money, save space, and still provide even more information to our students and faculty, we decided that the Danish print collection was the library's primary preservation obligation – NOT the journals printed outside Denmark.

The decision was clear:

- first, to cancel subscriptions to all unused print titles as well as all print journals having reliable e-access
- later, to go through our entire print collection and discard all journals with secure e-access and archiving.

This was a daunting task and would not have been possible just a few years earlier.

Making it happen

First, I needed to weed out the print subscription of all e-journals with a licence including perpetual access, which meant all our 'big deal' licences as well as a few more, giving a total of 5,712 'secure' online titles. This list had to be checked against our total list of subscribed journals (3,872 titles); the total overlap was 1,165 titles representing a value of almost US$900,000. As all of these journals were part of big deal packages and the online editions still had to be paid for, the actual savings after cancellation were about 10 percent.

This left just over 2,700 print titles, including titles where the electronic access is less secure and print has to be maintained.

I then started looking at the usage of these current subscriptions. Because our stacks are closed, all journal articles must be photocopied by a member of staff and handed to the user, and a

new automated system keeps track of orders. Thus it is possible to extract comprehensive usage stats giving number of copies per journal title, current as well as cancelled. This 'print copy' statistics list has 3,496 titles altogether from which articles have been copied more than five times in the past three years.

After comparing the remaining print titles with the printed copy usage stats, we were left with just under 2,000 titles for which we had little or no use. The rest of the usage had been in older volumes of current electronic journals, in already cancelled journals, and in our Danish legal deposit journals.

I had now, one way or the other, sifted through almost 10,000 titles, and I am happy to say I did not need to do it by hand or by heavy involvement of my already overburdened IT department.

By using Ulrich's Serials Analysis System (USAS) – a new analytical tool created by Bowker to evaluate serials collections – I was able to load all the different lists into the system and in less time than it takes to write the procedure down, I had total comparisons between the lists and could subtract and add to my heart's content.

My final list of 2,000 'not used' print journals gave not just title, ISSN and usage, but also provided subject headings, information on whether the journal was available electronically (E) – another feature in USAS – and approximate price (also from Ulrich's). I quickly sorted out the titles tagged with E – they had to be dealt with by hand to see if we already had them online (print with free online, part of an aggregated package, etc.), or if we had missed an opening for online access where possible (with print).

The rest of the print journals had to be evaluated by our subject librarians. I downloaded the reports for each subject and forwarded them to their respective subject specialists. It was a very difficult process for all; the actual workload was not insignificant and agreeing to cancel any subscription is a very painful process. No one wants to look at a list of serials they have specifically selected for their area of expertise and choose to let go of a number of them.

I did, however, have criteria that would let them keep a journal even though it had low usage. For example, some of the university departments have their own special libraries. On occasion they drop a subscription when they know that we have it in the main library. If this was recently done, that could mean the usage had been in the departmental copy and thus be a reason to keep the subscription. Another reason might be if it was a very obscure but high impact factor title that was not available by inter-library loan. The subject specialists had a six-week deadline for this project. There was a little back and forth, as you can imagine, but the job was done on time, and between August 2004 and December 2004 we identified about 500 journals that we could cancel. This, on top of the titles already made e-only, helped us to realize approximately US$90,000 in savings. We also were now able to provide a much better service to our users and give our much burdened check-in staff a little less work.

When the actual cancellations of journals were done, we started looking at our older holdings, as the second part of my project was to take a little pressure off our stacks. We started out with the titles in JSTOR, as we deemed it the safest archive of them all. This time I matched the complete JSTOR package against our entire holdings – not just the current. As you can imagine, these lists were huge and it *did* take more than a few minutes to compute the overlap.

I think throwing perfectly good journals out is painful and extremely worrisome for all involved, so we contacted JSTOR to ask if they had hard copies of the titles we wanted to discard. We got a list back with quite a few titles that they did not have, which we subsequently packed and shipped to Ann Arbor, discarding the rest.

Implications of carrying out the exercise

All these savings meant that we actually had a little air in our budget and therefore were able to buy more online journals, journal back-files, and databases. It was important to me to investigate how the individual back-file packages compared to our current holdings. Would we cover weak areas, lighten the load on our photocopy centre? For this I had several tools: as a subscriber to Serials Solutions I used their Overlap Analysis tool for quick results as well as Ulrich's for more precise answers.

I could also have made an Excel macro to compare the different files and holdings, but since the large data-loads tie up my PC for long periods of time, I decided not to; also the added benefit of Ulrich's subject data eases the decision process.

Future developments

Our current project is to examine our databases. Do we need new ones? What are they indexing? Many bibliographic databases have coverage resembling each other and it can be rather difficult to see what the actual difference is, but by loading the coverage for each database and comparing them, it is quite easy to see not only which journals they index and where they overlap, but also to see within which subjects the strengths and weaknesses are.

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