



Evidence Summary

A Survey of Electronic Serials Managers Reveals Diversity in Practice

A Review of:

Branscome, B. A. (2013). Management of electronic serials in academic libraries: The results of an online survey. *Serials Review*, 39(4), 216-226. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.serrev.2013.10.004>

Reviewed by:

Laura Costello
Head of Library Materials and Acquisitions
Teachers College
Columbia University
New York, New York, United States of America
Email: lac2184@columbia.edu

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Abstract

Objective – To examine industry standards for the management of electronic serials and measure the adoption of electronic serials over print.

Design – Survey questionnaire.

Setting – Email lists aimed at academic librarians working in serials management.

Subjects – 195 self-selected subscribers to serials email lists.

Methods – The author created a 20 question survey that consisted primarily of closed-ended questions pertaining to the collection demographics, staff, budget, and tools of serials management groups in academic libraries. The survey was conducted via

Survey Monkey and examined using the analytical features of the tool. Participants remained anonymous and the survey questions did not ask them to reveal identifiable information about their libraries.

Main Results – Collection demographics questions revealed that 78% of surveyed librarians estimated that print-only collections represented 40% or fewer of their serials holdings. The author observed diversity in the factors that influence print to digital transitions in academic libraries. However 71.5% of participants indicated that publisher technology support like IP authentication was required before adopting digital subscriptions.

A lack of standardization also marked serials workflows, department responsibilities, and department titles. The author did not find a correlation between serials budget and the

enrollment size of the institution. Participants reported that they used tools from popular serials management vendors like Serials Solutions, Innovative Interfaces, EBSCO, and Ex Libris, but most indicated that they used more than one tool for serials management. Participants specified 52 unique serials management products used in their libraries.

Conclusion – In surveying academic librarians engaged in serials management, the author sought to identify trends and standards in the field, but instead found significant variation in serials budgets and processes amongst the responding libraries. While it is clear that electronic subscriptions are a significant development and now a permanent feature of serials management, decisions to move from print to digital are complex and definitive conclusions about best practices for serials transitions could not be drawn from this study.

The survey revealed that institutions have invested in staff and tools for the management of electronic serials, but staffing configurations and tool combinations are also extremely diverse. The author concluded that the lack of standardization in these areas and the disconnect between institution and serials budget size indicated a serials landscape that was highly individualized and customized to each institution's unique needs.

Commentary

This survey was ambitious and covered several important factors in modern serials management, but it may have raised more questions than it answered about the way libraries choose, conceptualize, moderate, and maintain their serials departments and collections in an increasingly digital landscape. The conclusion that serials management processes are very individualized and institution-specific seems accurate, but it is important to consider the unprecedented choice that libraries have enjoyed in vendors, access types, and package configurations since electronic serials first became accessible. Perhaps, rather than the assertion the author makes that electronic serials management

processes are on a trajectory from disordered to standardized, library collections are moving from standardization enforced through lack of options towards the customized collections they have always tried to cultivate.

The case for disordered-by-design electronic resources management is shown through earlier surveys. Both Srivastava and Taglienti (2005), and Collins (2008) showed similar diversity in practice and departmental organization. The trajectory from earlier surveys to the present work does not seem to indicate significant desire or action towards greater standardization in serials management processes.

The diversity between libraries can also be seen in the institutional factors and term definition differences observed in the study. The author reported that he received feedback from participants that some of the terms suggested in the multiple choice questions were confusing or specific to the point of unnecessary exclusion. This is particularly apparent in the section devoted to titles and team organization. The survey seemed to operate under the assumption that staff members and departments were uniquely dedicated to serials management, but this was not always the case. In some institutions, serials management and electronic services maintenance was a task shared across multiple teams or the entire staff. The fact that several specific tools, like Serials Solutions 360 Core, were common, but particular combinations of serials management tools were unique to each institution may reflect the relatively recent appearance of electronic serials in libraries. Tool configurations may have been developed to suit existing staff workflows, rather than libraries recruiting new teams and team members to operate specific management systems.

The lack of correlation between budget and institutional enrollment seems provocative, though this data could vary for many reasons such as a lack of well-defined terms for reporting. If it does stand it may only suggest an individualized balance at each institution

between serials spending and spending on other formats.

To clarify the landscape of electronic serials management, more specific research is needed including more intensive data collection strategies like interviews with serials professionals and a more vigorous examination of tool use and staff organization. The author acknowledges that because the survey was voluntary and institutions did not provide identifying information, further study is needed before general conclusions can be drawn about serials management across academic libraries. This research is important and should be studied broadly. Serials departments have had time to determine efficient workflows for the management of electronic serials and the study of this diverse landscape has potential implications for other

types of collections, like monographs, that are only now embracing digital access on a large scale.

References

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