

Scholars and serials

Will electronic journals save us from the heartbreak of scholarly drivel, the embarrassment of book budget bankruptcy, the halitosis of salami publications, and the morbid obesity of our collections?

by John Lubans, Jr.

AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER, all scholars and librarians commiserate about what's wrong with serials: they are audaciously overpriced, always late, budgetarily and bibliographically out-of-control, technologically vestigial, and overabundant. Some scholars and librarians further assert that too much of what is published is "ignorant drivel," and that if scholars weren't compelled to publish, most serials would deflate in price and pages. I confess to not being totally aloof from such sentiments.

In a recent seminar on electronic publishing, I saw a ray of hope for solving some of these problems. At first glance, electronic publishing does seem uniquely qualified to help reform the errant ways of serials.

In my simple thesis, electronic journals mean that libraries would no longer pay an up-front subscription cost: we would pay as we use the information in publishers' data banks. Considering the costs of computer inputting and storage, it is unlikely that publishers would maintain extensive backfiles or "inventories"; rather they would purge such files rigorously and ruthlessly.

Furthermore, publishers might even be motivated to "publish" only genuinely *new* information and reject that which does not make an obvious contribution, thus reducing the overall amount of information issued. I think this is so because information not used by consumers represents a financial loss (perhaps also a tax liability) to commercial publishers and will not be maintained. An electronic journal places a considerable risk on the publisher's shoul-

As associate university librarian at Duke University, Durham, N.C., **John Lubans, Jr.**, administers the technical (including serials) and public services departments. An ALA councilor, Lubans is best known for his work in user education, user surveys, and more recently, the management of libraries.

ders. Under current practices that risk is largely subsidized when libraries pay subscription fees (sometimes 2-3 years in advance) for sight-unseen journals.

That is my initial assessment of the matter. Keeping it in mind, I now want to explore the major perfidies attributed to serials to see if the overall situation is as grave as it is made out to be, and if so, whether electronic salvation is possible.

There are too many of them

We've heard of information explosions and the geometric growth of book collections. Even if these are now clichés, there is no denying the excess of publications, especially of serials. One estimate claims that over one million serial titles have come and gone since 1609, the year the first newspaper was published.¹

In spite of all the allegations directed at publishers, scholars still flood editorial boards with manuscripts and serve as reviewers and editors, and librarians still select new subscriptions and authorize the payment of invoices for new and old standing orders.

To get a feel for the physical magnitude of serials at Duke, I multiplied the average weight of a bound periodical (roughly 3.5 lbs.) by the number of serials Duke binds in a typical year. The impressive result is that we can claim to add 26 *tons* of bound information to our serial collections each year!

Apart from the stress serials create for library floors and budgets, scholars express consternation about the vastness of the lit-

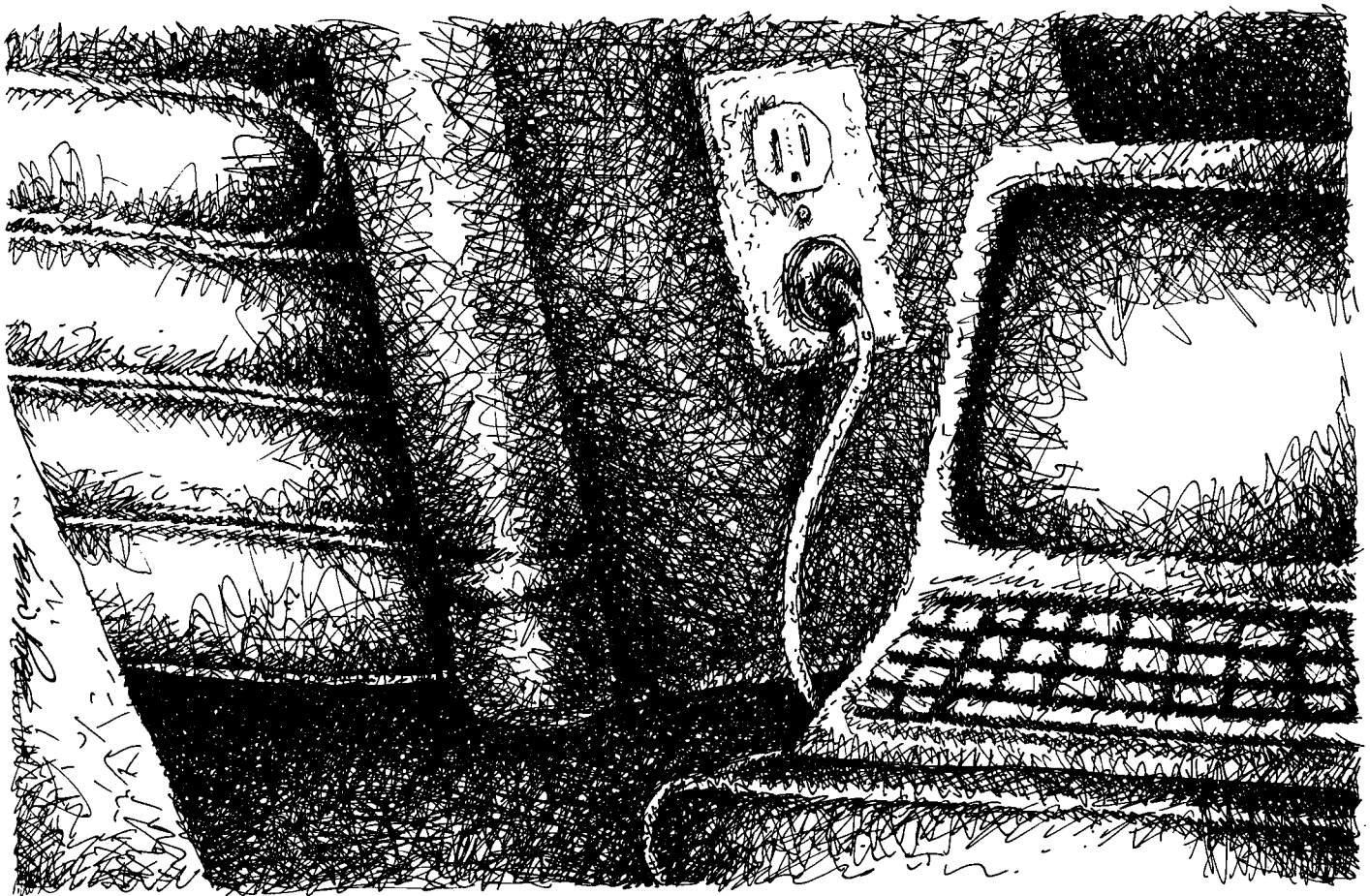
erature. In a survey of 3,800 scholars conducted by the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), 60 percent said it was "virtually impossible to keep up 'even minimally' with the literature in their fields."²

Publishers as villains

Publishers are an easy target—especially the more arrogant, greedy ones—what with the heinous differential pricing, sleazy copyright "licenses," and other schemes to wrest more money out of standstill library budgets. The prevalent library opinion is that publishers' rapacity (shareholders might not call it that) is indeed out of control. But are they really to blame for what's wrong with serials? Without willing suppliers (authors) and buyers (libraries), publishers would be out of business. That serial prices continue to rise well above inflation levels reflects an insatiable demand for serials. This demand is a seeming gold mine for publishers—one that won't go bust until either the ore runs out or the demand drops off (consider OPEC).

In fact, we are all part of the problem. Scholars and librarians appear to be willing victims of publishers. In spite of all the allegations directed at publishers, scholars still flood editorial boards with manuscripts and serve as reviewers and editors, and librarians still select new subscriptions and authorize the payment of invoices for new and old standing orders. We do this to serve the curricular and research needs of the universities at which we work.

There is, however, a reason why we tacitly choose not to rail too much against scholarly publishing practices. It is that many of us are committed to the notion that size of collection equals greatness: the bigger the better. Yes, other measures are used, but the most impressive one is size, and it is the measure readily recognized by scholars and librarians alike. Another reason for our professional silence is that the tenure system, the major single variable driving supply and demand of serials, is out of our hands. Any isolated reform ef-



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fort by librarians is doomed from the start.

Scholars as well are caught up in a trap perhaps not of their own choosing. In the ACLS survey, 29 percent of the scholars responding said the pressure to publish was "extremely strong"; 31 percent said it was "strong." Pressure to produce numerous articles can lead to unethical practices. In December 1986, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported on the retraction of falsified research findings by Harvard scientists and on the discovery that 55 of 137 published papers by a researcher at the University of California at San Diego Medical School were of questionable validity and another 13 were fraudulent.³

Contributing to these concerns is the much delayed and allegedly suppressed article, "The Integrity of the Scientific Literature," by W. W. Stewart and Ned Feder, which appeared in the Jan. 15, 1987 *Nature* (Vol. 325, p. 207-214).

From the librarian's perspective the pressure on scholars to publish has implications far beyond our book budgets. One teaching colleague told me that every hour a young instructor spends with a student damages the instructor's efforts to acquire tenure. Our so-called faculty/librarian partnership always has been a bit tentative; improvement is unlikely unless teaching is recognized as valid, rewardable activity in the pursuit of tenure and promotion.

"Ignorant drivell"

This is one scholar's harsh assessment of the quality of scholarly serial publication. He or she is not alone. More than a few scholars in all fields bemoan the quality of what is published. Is this just sour grapes or is there substance to the charges? In the ACLS survey, one third of the scholars said they "rarely find articles of interest in their discipline's [major] journal." Although the survey did not ask scholars to rate the quality of what is published, there are implications that all is not well.

Edward Huth, editor of the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, has seen enough "ethical offenses" in scholarly publishing to categorize them. "False authorship" is the widespread practice of crediting superiors and technicians with co-authorship when they have had little or nothing to do with the reported research. More seriously, there is "salami publication," wherein material adequate for a single paper is sliced into several "least publishable units." And continuing this metaphor, Huth cites the use of "meat extenders," a term he applies to the reissue of a paper with no new data or the merger of two previously published papers into a new one.⁴ If Huth is correct one can see that there is indeed a considerable, but avoidable, congestion of pages and information.

Electronic salvation unlikely

Returning to my original thesis, there are some disconcerting problems associated with the quality and quantity of scholarly publications. Will electronic journals solve these? When I put my electronic salvation idea to some colleagues I was dismayed, but not surprised, at their responses. Many feel that if publishers purge their electronic data banks, it will be the library's responsibility to purchase and maintain that which is dumped. Indeed, subscriptions to electronic journals will require our printing out and binding the full electronic text in order to preserve it for posterity.

We may not be able to resist our conservation impulses, but no matter. It is unlikely, due to various factors such as too little incentive and scholarly resistance, that electronic journals will soon proliferate or become equal to print. Ultimately, electronic publishing may enable us to make gains in space, but not in budgets; publishers will not give up earnings regardless of how many fewer "pages" they may "publish" in some giant computer.

What to do?

Librarians should join scholars in pursuing their own suggested reforms. In the ACLS survey, for example, 40 percent of the scholars surveyed agreed that the peer

review system needs reform. We could help them achieve change by making clear to them the book budget implications of current serial publishing. The following reforms that scholars have suggested make considerable sense:

1. In judging candidates for tenure, place emphasis on the *quality* of their published work rather than on its *quantity*. Instead of requesting all papers published, ask for the *few* best. This could have the salubrious effect of fewer papers published and a gain in time for teaching.

2. Allow a longer time span for grant

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research to be done. This would alleviate pressure to publish frequently in order to impress reviewers.

3. Require authors to sign-off on the authenticity of their work and to guarantee that it has not been published elsewhere.⁵

4. Encourage presidents and deans to take the pressure off scholars to publish frequently just so that they can advertise the excellence of their faculty. Encourage them to follow through on their often-stated commitment to excellence in teaching by establishing distinguished teaching professorships.⁶

Finally, encourage the ACLS to explore what can be called the "drivel factor." Librarians have their own literature to start with. Also, libraries should apply rigorous guidelines for the addition of any new serials. A policy of canceling one periodical to get another is a sensible approach to making the most of our limited budgets and sending a message to publishers/vendors that they, too, have a role in serials reform. □

Notes

1. This and other facts and cogent observations about serials appear in an article by Allen B. Veaner, "Into the Fourth Century," in the *Drexel Library Quarterly*, Vol. 21:4-28 (Winter 1985), Joline Ezzell, editor.

2. The 16-page summary of the ACLS survey of scholars written by Herbert C. Morton and Anne Jamieson Price appears in *Scholarly Communication*, No. 5, Summer 1986. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* carried a full report on the survey in its issue of Aug. 6, 1986, p. 1, 21-23.

3. Both these incidents are reported in the Dec. 3, 1986, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. 7,10. One of the Harvard researchers is quoted as saying that when expected results did not occur, "There was a lot of pressure in the lab and I didn't have the courage to tell them."

4. A report on Edward Huth's talk to the American Association for the Advancement of Science appears in the June 5, 1986, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. 5,9.

5. Three recommendations made by Huth as reported in the June 5, 1986, *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

6. Probably the best curriculum reform document, the Carnegie Foundation's *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*, includes this recommendation for faculty. The prologue and the major recommendations are printed in the Nov. 5, 1986, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. 16-22. A quote to consider: "The joy of teaching... can and should be a source of fulfillment as great as seeing one's name in print in the pages of a professional journal"



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