Bibliographic Access to Serials
A Study for the British Library

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The British Library takes approximately 182,000 serials titles. Each year some 9,000 new serials titles are added to the collection and over 1,000,000 issues are received. The notional costing for running the British Library's serials service in 1985 was estimated to be £6,700,000. In 1984 a decision was made by the senior management to investigate thoroughly the problems of serials control in the Library. The British Library Serials Study was set up, the aim of which was to:

> present and justify a strategy for improving serials control, using automated systems wherever appropriate.

The fragmented nature of the British Library means that there have been varying priorities given to keeping catalogue records up to date. In addition, although automation is applied almost universally in the library as far as the production of catalogues and other listings are concerned, the catalogues come in a variety of formats and applications of cataloguing codes. To some extent the British Library Serials Study arose from dissatisfaction felt, and often expressed, with the library's catalogues. A survey of reading room usage had appeared to indicate that there were users who preferred to visit other libraries rather than attempt to find a periodical entry in GK3 i.e. the main catalogue of the British Library Humanities and Social Sciences (H & SS). A particular problem was the use of the heading **Periodical Publications** followed by the place of publication and reference from this to a direct title entry - let alone from a guard book or printed volume catalogue to one produced in microfiche for-

mat. The extent of this dissatisfaction led to the British Library asking the Centre for Catalogue Research (as the Centre was then called) to undertake a study during July and August 1986 in the H & SS Main Reading Room and the Official Publications Library (OPL). Originally it was intended to carry out the study in the Science Reference and Information Services (SRIS) as well, but lack of staff prevented this being tackled at that stage.

In May 1985 I received a letter setting out the problems which it was hoped the Centre could study. It was pointed out that the serials records were spread over all manner of files - machine-readable, card, book, photocopied list, and so on. There were inconsistencies of bibliographic content and standardisation. The Division wanted to build upon what it had already done (machine-readable records could at least be adapted or reduced in length) but it was felt that *there was a lack of evidence on what sort of serials records catalogue users actually wanted*. It was presumed that it was possible to separate users' *bibliographic* needs from their *practical* needs, but the nature of the latter could only be guessed at.

After a number of discussions with senior staff from both H & SS and from SRIS I prepared a short paper setting out the aim, objectives and methods of the Centre's study. The following are the salient points from that paper.

Apparently there were two particular problems when attempting to trace details of serials held in the British Library:

(i) Users (including some members of the library's staff) often do not appear to understand the content, arrangement, and presentation of data in the existing catalogues ;

(ii) Library staff are unable to search for items in other sections/departments of the British Library, except by looking through a range of different catalogues compiled in a diversity of ways.

It had been suggested that a union list of serials in the British Library, which used a consistent and possibly simpler form of entry, would save considerable time, effort and annoyance, both for readers and for library staff.

The aim of the Centre's study was:

> to discover the needs of users in respect of

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bibliographic access (i.e. the amount of bibliographic description required) to the British Library's serials collections and to determine the most effective way in which those needs might be met.

I listed six objectives as follows:

(i) To establish an initial 'suggested subset' of data for serials catalogue records which is acceptable to the majority of British Library reader services staff.

(ii) To assess British Library users' understanding of, and satisfaction with catalogue entries as currently produced. Do the entries include the information the user expects to find? Are the layout, filing and presentation satisfactory?

(iii) To find out how users formulate their approach to the catalogue, i.e. what information do they bring to the catalogue and from where do they obtain this information?

(iv) To find out the nature of users' use of serials in the British Library, e.g. are they interested in the serial for its content, or as an artefact?

(v) To find out why users 'fail' when using the British Library's catalogues and, possibly, to obtain some evidence of the degree to which users are obtaining serials from sources other than the British Library when the latter should be expected to stock them.

(iv) To monitor those occasions when readers ask for a serial stocked by the British Library, but not held in that section of the library at which the enquiry is made.

As far as methods of data gathering are concerned, I have always placed a high value on experimental research in preference to market survey type research as the latter can often lead to greatly misleading results. To give users alternative options to search has always seemed to me a much more scientific and satisfactory method of assessing the performance of catalogue entries, sequences and forms of presentation, than merely asking for responses and opinions about possibly hypothetical situations (e.g. "if there was a 'title' catalogue would you use it?"). Unfortunately it was not possible to use experimental techniques with the readers using the H & SS Main Reading Room, because it would have taken too much of their time. I also felt that self-completed questionnaires would not be appropriate, as only those who wanted to complete them would do so and, also, there were too many practical problems involved in collecting them. I decided therefore that I would have to rely on interviews for collecting data on objectives (ii) to (iv). I wanted the interview schedule to be a fairly short one as my aim was to obtain a reasonably large number of responses. These responses were obtained from a

representative sample of users throughout the opening hours of 20 days during the period 4th July to 7th August 1986. Readers were approached when they were working in the Reading Room and not when they were entering or leaving it. I did not want them to be selected for interviewing only at the catalogues, but also when they were at the shelves or walking about. Interviews at desks were only undertaken if there were no neighbouring users who could be disturbed. As it was not possible to use experimental methods it appeared that the next best thing was to show users a small sample of catalogue entries. These entries were selected from those currently produced by the British Library and were for a range of typical categories of serials titles. They were selected by senior members of the British Library's staff. Users were asked to comment on their understanding, or lack of understanding, of the various parts of the entries, including abbreviations and punctuation. Other methods of study were used, but this article describes the responses to the interview.

I had hoped that it would be possible to carry out a minimum of 300 interviews. The Centre did not have enough staff to conduct all of these itself and so some members of the British Library's staff volunteered to help us. In fact, because of the great pressure of work they were under, these staff were unable to carry out as many interviews as we had hoped. The result was that only 225 interviews were undertaken, and of these, I carried out 108. Although this quantity of responses (or indeed even the proposed 300) were insufficient to produce high statistical accuracy for any particular figure, the study was carried out in such a way that I felt well satisfied that the overall results could be trusted. In any case we were looking for a qualitatifve response as much as a quantitative one.

Originally the interviews were intended to last 15 to 20 minutes, but the inclusion of the six sample catalogue entries led to most lasting 30 minutes and, a few, 35-40 minutes. One of the happy impressions which will remain with me from this study was the great willingness of users to cooperate with us. Of 240 persons approached only 15 refused to be interviewed and all these refusals were courteous and for good reasons. I had expected some instances of unpleasantness bearing in mind the wide range of people we would be approaching: authors, film producers, senior academics, researchers, publishers, students, eccentrics! After all, we were in one of the major research libraries in the world and many people had very limited time; many were from overseas and language might sometimes prove to be too great

an obstacle to good communication. In fact there was not one unpleasant response during the whole study and of the 108 persons I interviewed at least 10 actually thanked me for the interview! As a result of going through the six sample entries they felt that they had learned useful information about the catalogues which would help them in the future.

It was not possible to obtain a stratified sample, but a serious attempt was made to obtain a reasonable cross-section of users by not always approaching the same type of person in succession. During the twenty days of the study, interviews were carried out during all the opening hours on Monday to Friday up to 5 p.m. and in addition some interviews were conducted in the evenings and on a Saturday.

The interview questionnaire consisted of 12 main questions one of which asked the person interviewed to give their opinion of the six sample catalogue entries and I will deal with this part of the study in greater detail in a moment. First I would like to give some results from the initial part of the interview.

I was pleased to find evidence that the sample of readers we interviewed was a representative one. Figures of usage provided by the British Library had shown that it was calculated that overseas visitors accounted for 40% of total H & SS Reading Room usage. The results of the Centre's study showed that exactly the same proportion of our sample came from overseas. Of these, 44% came from North America, 44% from Europe and 12% from other countries e.g. Australia, India, Japan and so on. In fact, many of the readers whom we approached thinking that they came from overseas turned out to be of British nationality.

The following figures relate to the complete sample of 225. On the days they were interviewed: 71 (31.6%) had either used or were searching for details of a serial ;
89 (39.6%) had looked for details of a serial in a British Library catalogue within the last month. Of these, 35 persons had either used or were searching for a serial in the catalogue on the day they were interviewed. Therefore the total number of persons who had used a serial or searched a British Library catalogue within the last month was 125 (55.6%). Although all 225 users were asked for their understanding of the sample catalogue entries, only this sub-sample of 125 were interviewed further to find out the following:

(i) Did they have any problems when using the catalogues? 66 (57.4% of the sample) said they had. Many of these users had more than one and, of the problems identified, the multiplicity

of sequences and the filing of entries caused most difficulty - especially the heading **Periodical Publications** followed by place in GK 3 ;

(ii) What were the actual details they had of the serial **before** they used the catalogue?
94 (81%) had the complete title
18 (15.5%) had title or subject works
4 (3.4%) had title abbreviations or initials
14 (12.1%) had the name of the issuing body
14 (12.1%) had the name of the publisher
14 (12.1%) had some other details such as date or volume number;

(iii) What was the main source of this information? As one might expect there were no surprises here:
7 (6.1%) had obtained their information from previous use of a catalogue in the British Library
6 (5.3%) had done so from previous use of a catalogue elsewhere
84 (73.7%) had the details from a bibliography or a reference
1 (0.9%) obtained the details from another library's staff
22 (19.3%) already had the details because of their existing knowledge
Interestingly no one claimed to have details as a result of obtaining them from a member of the British Library's staff although this must often be the case ;

(iv) Did users require the original version of the periodical or, if it could have been made available **immediately**, would a photocopy have satisfied their needs?
95 (76%) said that a photocopy would have satisfied them
18 (14.4%) said that they needed to see the original journal. The reasons were: bibliographic; ease of reading; quality of illustration; the binding; because of publication purposes; the need to see other articles, or the article was too long to photocopy

The last of the results which I will mention from the first part of the interview are those relating to the length of time all 225 persons interviewed had been using the facilities of the British Library's reading rooms. I divided the time into six periods and the results were as follows:

Less than 1 month	51 (22.7%)
Less than 1 year	20 (8.9%)
1-5 years	59 (26.2%)
6-10 years	33 (14.7%)
11-20 years	38 (16.9%)
More than 20 years	22 (9.8%)
(There were 2 missing cases)	

When we analysed the responses from the 66 persons who claimed to have problems with searching the catalogue for serials by the periods of time they had been using the British Library's reading rooms, it was interesting to note that experience made no difference. If anything the results seem to indicate that the newer users had not yet had an opportunity to become fully aware of all the difficulties. For example, only 7 of those with less than a month's experience said that they experienced problems compared to 20 with one to five years experience and 24 with over eleven years experience. There was also no evidence that overseas users experienced more difficulties than those from the UK. These results, which demonstrated the common nature of problems for people of all levels of experience, were very much underlined by users' responses to the six sample catalogue entries. It is this part of the project that I will now describe.

The six sample catalogue entries as currently produced by serials are given as an appendix to this paper. Three with record numbers prefixed with an 'r' are from the General Catalogue, Current' and those with the prefix 'gk' are from the 'General Catalogue, pre-1971'. Both these catalogues are provided on microfiche. The entries were selected as representative ones by senior members of the British Library staff and later checked in great detail by these staff against the actual serials held. Every entry had errors in them but from my experience I know that this is true of many libraries' catalogues. In any case I wanted 'real' entries to be looked at by users and not theoretically 'perfect' ones.

Each user was shown the sheet and asked if they would mind giving their opinion and understanding of any parts of entries, even punctuation. They were asked "Firstly, is there anything you do not understand or find clear about the entry, and, secondly, even if you do understand it do you think the information could be presented in a better way?"

It is true that, for the great majority of users questioned, only one or two of the entries were relevant to them in terms of the subject covered by the serial; however it was pointed out to them that usually entries for serials in their subjects would be produced in the same manner and therefore terms, abbreviations and punctuations would have exactly the same meaning. It is also true that many users would not usually take notice of many of the data elements because they did not use them and the fact that they did not understand them would not worry them. But this raises two questions:

(i) If other readers also do not use them, why do these data elements need to be included?

(ii) If the data elements are in fact needed and could be useful to readers, should they not be provided in such a clear way that they can be understood at first sight and their value realised?

Many of the users either had not consulted serials, or at least only on very rare occasions, but we pointed out to them that they might need to do so at any time and that catalogue entries were provided to serve all needs, both current and potential.

Interviewers used a 'highlighting' pen to mark any part of the entry which caused problems and then if comments were made wrote these alongside the entry. We asked for comments on 6 different entries from 225 people and sometimes as many as four comments might be made about any one entry. This all had to be analysed manually so considerable work was involved. Analysis was by ISBD(S) 'areas'.

Users were asked to look at the first entry for 'ANNALS of Latin American Studies' in particular detail as it was short and many of the features were present in subsequent entries. Many people said that they found it perfectly clear at first reading; however, the interviewer would then ask for the user's understanding of particular words, phrases, abbreviations, etc. and the following demonstrates just some of the lack of understanding or confusion displayed. The most crucial difficulties were found in relation to Area 3 'Numbering area' and 'Holdings' and especially the use of hyphens for both ISBD punctuation and as 'open' signs indicating continuing runs of serials. For example - No. 1 - was sometimes read as if the hyphens were brackets and the data was in parenthesis. Therefore this was read by several users as '1 only'. Here are a few of the users' comments made in relation to Area 3 and 'Holdings' for 'ANNALS of Latin American Studies'.

> *Held from No. 1 to No. 4;*
> *No. bothers me. Expect vol. and no. only within a vol.;*
> *No. 1 - with 'holdings' confusing as to exact 'holdings';*
> *Why record No. 1 - 1981 - if the British Library is not really holding No. 1 onwards?;*
> *2 volumes in stock - Nos. 1 and 4 (Note. It is interesting that this user had 19 years experience of using the British Library H & SS Reading Room);*
> *No. 1 is on Tokyo is how I would read it;*
> *Everything held from 1981 onwards, but something exceptional about 1984 'Holding from' might be clearer;*

- This clue really is very slight ;

Does "-" mean run finishes here? ;

'Holdings' puts me off; it is a financial word.

Something simpler is needed ;

Assume this is something I do not need to know about. ;

and many more!

There were 93 instances of some confusion over the word 'Holdings' and 94 cases of confusion over the '-' following 'no. 4' in the 'Holdings' statement. 53 people were confused by '-No.1-' in Area 3.

Area 5 'Physical description area' produced evidence of the problems experienced with abbreviations. In 'ANNALS of Latin American Studies' 'v' was taken to mean the following:

Vol. 5; 5 vols.; Vide; Various; 5 articles; v. in Italian means 'see also' (Note. This reader took v. to mean 'see also' Articles in English ...); Contains; No sense at all; all by itself; Voir; Verso ;

and so on!

There were 179 cases of confusion over v. which in AACR2 Rule 12.5B1 is the 'specific material designation' for printed serials.

My final examples are for the 'Notes area' and the use of jargon terms. In the case of 'ANNALS of Latin American Studies' the term 'Cover title' appears. The following are some of the interpretations of this:

I assume 'Cover title' means "Articles in English ..." ;

Might mean each year has a different title ;

Information on the cover could be the title in English, Spanish and Japanese ;

Cover title means that the original title has been covered by rebinding ;

and so on.

There were 120 cases of confusion relating to the term 'Cover title'. The number of cases here and for all the preceding relate just to 'ANNALS of Latin American Studies'.

The rest of the comments both for this serial and for the other five make fascinating reading and clearly show the need for producers of catalogues and cataloguing codes to be far more aware of the people who actually use what they provide.

Conclusions

This study was conducted specifically for the British Library and of course some of the findings relate just to that institution; nevertheless the following conclusions have relevance to the wider library community.

(i) Accurate 'holdings' data are considered far more important by users than 'bibliographic' details.

(ii) Ideally users would like to have correlation to volume numbers with dates in the 'Holdings' statement but many users recognised this was an almost impossible task because of the sheer magnitude of the problem.

(iii) Very few users want a journal as an artefact. Most would be well satisfied with a surrogate such as a photocopy or microfilm if this could be supplied immediately and with good enough quality.

(iv) There was little evidence that users of long experience are necessarily more knowledgeable about data in the catalogue entries than new users.

(v) Clarity of presentation and layout of the entries is far more important to users than additional data. Particular problems are caused by:-

(a) Over abbreviation e.g. v. instead of vol., ill. instead of illus.

(b) Ambiguous use of punctuation, especially the ISBN convention of using hyphens which get confused with hyphens used in dates.

(c) The use of jargon terms such as 'holdings', 'imprint', 'cover title', etc.

(d) Lack of 'labelling' of certain data elements (e.g. 'Publ. by').

(e) Lack of clarity of terms used, such as 'continued as' instead of 'split into', or the omission of words such as 'by' or 'at' in relation to publishers or places of publication.

(f) The considerable lack of understanding of the difference between the 'bibliographic' date and the 'holdings' date. It would appear that, in general, use of just the latter would be much less confusing to the user.

(g) Lack of 'paragraphing' of data, e.g. if a title changes, give each change a fresh line if possible, also the appropriate dates.

I hope that some of these conclusions may have an influence on certain aspects of serials cataloguing and cataloguing in general in the future.

Acknowledgements

ANNALS of Latin American studies. - No.1-. - [Tokyo] : Japan
Association for Latin American Studies, 1981-.
v.. - Articles in English, Spanish and Japanese. - Cover
title.
Holdings: no.4 (1984)-.
r6710172   P.801/3471

[BULLETIN de statistique (Kigali)]
Bulletin de statistique / Ministère du plan, République
rwandaise. - No.1-. - Kigali : Direction générale de la
statistique. [1962?]-.
30cm. - Name of issuing body varies. - Quarterly. - From
1974 issues an annual supplement. - Description based on :
no.61 (Apr. 1979).
Holdings: no.42 (Jul. 1974) ; no.61 (Apr. 1979)-.
r6208656   S.V.890/4

JOURNAL
Journal of Experimental Psychology ... - Vol.1, no.1 (Feb.
1916) - Vol.102, no.6 (June 1974).
Princeton, N.J. : Psychological Review Co., 1916-1974.
102v. : 26cm.
Frequency varies. - Continued as: "Journal of Experimental
Psychology. General" ; and, "Journal of Experimental
Psychology. Memory, learning and cognition" ; and, "Journal
of Experimental Psychology. Human perception and performance"
; and, "Journal of Experimental Psychology. Animal behavior
processes". From vol.10, no.1 (Feb. 1927) - vol.23, no.1
(July 1938) published for the American Psychological
Association by the Psychological Review Co. From vol.23, no.2
(Aug. 1938) onwards published by the American Psychological
Association. - Imprint varies.
Holdings: Vol.1-8 ; 10-55 ; 56, no.2-102, no.6
gk92016855   PP.1247.ed

JOURNAL of Italian linguistics
Italian Linguistics. - Vol.1 (1976), no.1-. - Lisse : Peter
de Ridder, 1976-.
ill ; 25cm. - Two issues per year. - From vol.3 also
entitled: Journal of Italian Linguistics. - From vol.3
published: Dordrecht : Foris Publications. - The issues for
1976 and 1977 are also numbered 1-4.
r6004506   P.983/102

OFFICIAL POST OFFICE DIRECTORY
The official Post Office directory of Victoria (Bailliere's),
containing the names, residences, and occupations of the
inhabitants of the post towns of the Colony, inclusive of
Melbourne and suburbs, arranged locally and alphabetically
... / compiled by authority. - 1868-1885.
Melbourne : F.F. Bailliere, 1868-1885.
6v..
Frequency varies. - Title varies. - Reference: Ferguson6529.
Holdings: 1868-1870, 1875. - MICROFICHE. 33 microfiches;
11x16cm
gk92023347   Mic.F.241

PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS. London
[The Times]
-Index to The Times. - Mar./Apr. 1957-Nov./Dec.1972.
London : Times Publishing Company, [1957-1973].
95v. ; 25cm.
Continues: "The official index to the Times." - Continued
as: "The Times index". - From 1972 published: "Reading :
Newspaper Archive Developments".
gk90049209   2123.b-2124.b North Library Gallery
- [Another copy]
                                    PP.8004.xa
- [Another copy of the volumes from 1967 to 1972]
                                    OPL