Serials Selection:

Organizing Information for Decision Making

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ABSTRACT

A proper decision to select or to weed a particular serial title requires collecting information on the title, its usefulness to a clientele, and its place in the literature of a discipline. The information can come from a wide variety of sources, including the citation indexes. The roles of faculty, librarians and the library administration at the University of Rhode Island are outlined to illustrate what is believed to be a very thorough method of making clear and intelligent decisions regarding new serial subscriptions and serial subscription cancellations.

INTRODUCTION

At the University of Rhode Island a very thorough process, I believe, is used to select new serials for the collection each year. While every library is different, without doubt parts of this process would be useful in a variety of libraries, depending on resources available.

The University of Rhode Island Library has around 740,000 monograph titles and 7,500 serial subscriptions, and in good years we may order 50 to 100 new subscriptions. We have a professional staff of 27 counting all branches. We are a mid-sized academic library. The literature will be reviewed briefly, the procedures at the University of Rhode Island will be outlined, and finally information available from Science Citation Index will be evaluated for use in serial selection.

1. The literature - a brief look.

There are dozens of factors which could be employed in serial evaluation and most articles deal with a few of them. Some devise models using a formula with weighted factors. Some are very mathematical. The factors or criteria can be classified in various ways but I would say there are five general groups of criteria, all of which will be discussed in connection with the University of Rhode Island's procedures:

- 1) Use factors, such as circulation, in house use, etc.
- 2) Basic bibliographic characteristics such as frequency, starting date, price, etc.
- 3) Scholarly characteristics such as whether the serial is refereed or not, the scholarly level, etc.
4) The place of the serial in the mission or purpose of the institution, relevance to a curriculum, or to the clientele's research;

5) The place of the serial in its discipline, for example how it would rank in terms of its impact factor, a measure of how frequently its articles are cited.

Woodward (1) would classify these as user-oriented variables (1 and 4, above) and bibliographic variables (2, 3, and 5 as I interpret it).

Kraft and Palasek (2) present a formula based on ratings (1-10) to be applied to usage, relevance to the curriculum and availability elsewhere, all representing the worth of a journal, to be weighed against the cost. To do this they employed some novel evaluation forms, published in their paper.

Pan (3) evaluates the use of journal citation counts versus the impact factor, concluding that plain citation counts predict journal usage better than the impact factor.

However Stankus and Rice (4) indicate the impact factor correlates better with circulation if one is comparing journals within one discipline or subject area.

DePew and Basu (5) apply Bradford's law to distinguish three groups of journals in terms of how often they are cited, for a study of journals in the area of library materials preservation. They conclude it is not a reliable way to develop a core collection in this area, since important journals were left out.

Broude (6) has developed a model for evaluating a journal, based on price, language of publication, availability at nearby libraries, use, citation frequency, curriculum relatedness, article productivity, and reputation of the publisher. Weights were assigned to each variable. They found librarians using the model came up with a very different list of journals than faculty, who used price and publisher's reputation as the principle variables.

Segal (7) discusses measures of use at some length, and indicates that such measures can be costly.

Broadus lists three ways to measure the use of serials:

- Marking volumes to be reshelved,
- Questionnaires to users,
- Direct observation (8).

2. The procedure at the University of Rhode Island

In our library the serials selection process begins with the academic faculty (including librarians, who have faculty status) sending requests to the appropriate subject specialists in the library, using a serials request form. These can be submitted at any time, but the deadline for August consideration is July 1, or the request will be considered the following year. All requests are considered on an annual basis together in a ranked list, to avoid selecting a serial when a better one may come up for consideration later.

Once the requests are collected they are checked for basic bibliographic information. If the citation is not complete the following information is obtained, using the Faxon Catalog (9), Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory (10), or the OCLC terminal: proper title, publisher address, starting date, price, frequency and etc. We consider how many articles, how many issues you get for your money. We must be cautious about brand new titles since much of the evaluative information is unavailable and there is a market volatility - some new journals do not last long.
We must then consider the scholarly characteristics of the journals. Sometimes one can find critical reviews of new journals such as those published every October in *Nature*. We like to receive a sample issue along with the request form if possible. If not, we write for them but our experience is that about two or three months are required and you never receive all of them. A sample issue can give you an idea of the scholarly level of the journal and sometimes whether or not it is refereed. If no sample is available, we use *Current Contents* pages, so at least we can look at a few article titles. One would also consider the publisher's reputation or that of the journal, if known, in its discipline. We also find out which indexes or abstracts cover each serial title.

Another set of factors involves the place of the journal in the institution's mission or purpose. This may be its relevance to the library clientele's research needs, or in our case, that plus its relevance to the university's programs and curriculum. The faculty justification should show what courses and/or research are supported by the title. The subject specialist (librarian) then writes a justification based on all factors considered, including those listed below.

Finally we consider the place a serial title has in the literature of a discipline. One piece of information we obtain, where available is the impact factor from *Science Citation Index*. This is calculated, for example, by counting all the citations in all journals in *Science Citation Index* during 1984, to articles published in journal x during 1982 and 1983. This count is then divided by the number of articles appearing in journal x during 1982 and 1983 to arrive at the impact factor for journal x (11). Thus the impact factor is a ratio of citations over articles for a particular journal. Also one can find out how a journal ranks compared to other journals in a discipline by using the Ranking Package 8 in *Journal Citation Reports* found each year in *Science Citation Index*. We check to see which journals we have in each ranked subject list. If we find there are ones with higher impact factors than the ones being requested we may want to find out why the others were not considered or consider them. One has to consider the fact that different disciplines have different ranges of impact factors so one journal must be considered within its discipline.

The impact factor does indicate how many citations a journal is generating per article published. It does therefore say something about that journal's impact on the literature. There are some problems, however. There are many fisheries journals from the tropics, which are not covered by *Science Citation Index* at all, as revealed by Pauly and McLean (12, 13). These are often important journals for particular libraries. Another problem in interpreting the impact factor is that not all citations are equal (14). One author may cite another for very substantial reasons or perfunctory ones, or a citation may even be a refutation.

REFERENCES