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Chipping Away at Serials Processing Backlogs in Technical Services

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ABSTRACT. The author reports on the results of a survey on serials processing backlogs in technical services. Approximately 40% of responding libraries had some type of backlog of serials, both print and electronic. The types of materials in the backlogs and the factors that contributed to them are discussed, together with the storage of backlogged materials and the public's access to them. The study examines possible methods to reduce the backlog and perhaps prevent future backlogs in serials processing.

KEYWORDS. Backlogs, arrearages, serials processing, print serials, electronic serials

INTRODUCTION

Serial backlogs, or arrearages as they may be referred to in polite society, have long been a challenge for libraries. Backlogged items may consist of gifts, foreign-language materials, electronic serials, and problem pieces of low priority. Robert P. Holley emphasizes that uncataloged materials are useless and therefore backlogs are a library disservice.[1] Simply put, they are bad for business. Perhaps if we glean some insight into what may have caused the backlog, we may find a cure. This study reports on how libraries around the United States and Canada are tackling their backlogs by managing the factors that have caused the unprocessed items to accumulate in

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the first place. Many studies have addressed cataloging backlogs of monographs, but few have focused on the peculiarities associated with serials. This research attempts to fill a gap in the current literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Backlogs in general have been a topic in library literature for over five decades. George Piternick, in his 1969 article on university library arrearages, reflected on the paucity of relevant recent literature on the treatment of arrearages. Piternick reasoned a backlog of some size was often desirable in order to minimize the up-and-down effects in the rate of book acquisition and to permit optimum conditions in acquisitions and cataloging. This delay in processing might even be necessary to achieve maximum cost efficiency. He concluded from his questionnaire to ARL libraries that for the university libraries reporting having a backlog (between 62 and 83%), the overwhelming cause was the lack of Library of Congress catalog copy. Some type of cataloging that might have been less than the LC standard would have had to suffice to reduce the backlog of monographs. The future was one of growing backlogs.[2]

Agnew, Landram, and Richards (1985) also used the questionnaire approach to determine if backlogs of uncataloged monographs still existed. Their hypothesis was that automation should have reduced or eliminated the backlog. By the 1980s libraries surely would have learned to control their backlogs. Respondents that reported no significant backlogs attributed this to sufficient staffing levels. Conversely, inadequate staff and expertise was listed as the most important factor causing and increasing the backlog. It was concluded that automated systems were helping to reduce the backlogs. Libraries relied more on paraprofessionals whose duties had been upgraded to handle the backlog.[3]

Inefficient workflows in technical services have been cited in more than one study as a culprit encouraging the growth of backlogs. Donald Share (1986) at Rice University talked about streamlining duties in the department by incorporating backlogged items into the regular workflow. Backlogged materials were prioritized and closed off so nothing more could be added. As in the Agnew et al. study, paraprofessionals were trained to handle the backlog to free up professional catalogers.[4]

Automation turns out to be a double-edged sword. Although it was found to significantly reduce backlogs, later studies show that patrons have come to expect information to be available with such speed that

backlogs of uncataloged materials become a detriment to access. Behrens and Smith conducted a survey (1987) to assess the then current situation regarding backlogs in academic libraries. They found that most libraries did maintain cataloging backlogs, with only a few providing bibliographic access to the material. The focus of libraries was not necessarily on reduction of the backlog, but diminishing its negative effect by providing some type of public access to the items via the integrated library system.[5] Cipolla found that the new AACR2 rules produced additional backlogs because of the amount of recataloging involved and the incidence of related corrective actions.[6]

Sally Rogers (1991) distinguished between normal and historic backlogs. Normal backlogs developed during routine workflow, while historic ones contained thousands of items that had waited years to be processed. Rogers brought up the need for some type of assessment of the backlog—what materials were in it, how many of them were wanted, and the steps to be taken to add the items to the collection. This information could be used as a decision-making tool for reduction of the backlog. The backlog might be incorporated into the regular workflow or serve as the basis for a special project.[7]

In the 21st century, articles are still being written about backlogs—how they get started and how they might be eliminated. Sung (2004) tackled the backlog issue from the perspective of a public library. Once again, inefficient workflow in technical services contributed to a backlog of uncataloged, unprocessed items. Staff and budget cuts were partly to blame. By revising the mission statement for the department, creating a cataloging decision manual, and retraining staff, the library was able to eliminate a sizable backlog.[8]

THE SURVEY

For this study an online survey was designed to obtain general information from a group of diverse libraries on the following questions:

- Does the library currently have a serials backlog? (For purposes of this study, a backlog was defined as materials for which processing had been deferred.)
- What types of materials are being backlogged?
- What is your estimate of the size of the backlog?
- What factors do you believe have caused the backlog?

- Are backlogged materials accessible to the public?
- How are backlogged materials stored?
- What is your library's plan to reduce the backlog?

The survey was approved by the IRB (Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research) at Mississippi State University. An electronic link to the survey was sent to the SERIALST listserv, which serves as an informal electronic forum for most aspects of serials processing in libraries. The online survey was sent out on September 19, 2007 and closed on October 2, 2007. Information on type of library and size of institution was collected for comparative purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Responses from 180 libraries were collected and analyzed. The majority of the responding libraries were from within the United States, but there were also some responses from libraries in Canada, Europe, India, New Zealand, and South Africa. The findings of the survey are summarized in what follows, followed by discussion based on the responses.

- Of the 180 libraries responding to the survey, 52.2% were university libraries, 20% four-year college libraries, 15% special libraries, 7.8% community college libraries, and 5% public libraries.
- Approximately half of the academic libraries responding (51%) represented institutions with full-time equivalent enrollment (FTE) of up to 5,000 students. The remaining respondents (49%) were from institutions of over 10,000 FTE.
- Of the 180 libraries responding, 71 (39.4%) replied that they definitely had a serials processing backlog, and 109 (60.6%) replied they did not currently have a backlog. Thirteen of the libraries answering in the negative qualified their responses with the statement that the size of their backlog was minimal and was being addressed (see Table 1).
- Table 1 is a breakdown by type of library of the number of libraries that responded they had a serials backlog. Forty-four university libraries had a backlog, which was 47.31% of the total university libraries responding to the survey. A significant number of special libraries (66.67%) acknowledged the presence of a backlog. College libraries (16.67%) and community colleges (21.42%) had no appreciable

TABLE 1. Responses from libraries: libraries
with serials backlogs

Does the library currently have a serials backlog? (Yes)	Count	Percentage
A. University	44	47.31
B. College	6	16.67
C. Community college	3	21.42
D. Public	0	0.00
E. Special	18	66.67

backlogs, while all the public libraries that responded (10) had no serials backlog.

- The most frequently reported types of materials backlogged were print serials and gifts. Additional materials in the backlog were foreign-language materials, analyzed serials, and software (CD-ROMs). More than one category could apply. The "Other" category included electronic serials, special-collection materials, and government documents (see Table 2).
- Estimates of the size (approximate number of items) of the backlog generally ranged from 500 to 1,000 items. Some libraries (9.5%) reported backlogs of over 10,000 items.
- The principal factors cited for contributing to the size of the backlog were staffing competency and lack of time to devote to backlogged materials. Another major cause was the library's budget. Further reasons given that contributed to the backlog were the lack of MARC records and check-in problems. The "Other" category

TABLE 2. Responses from libraries: materials
in the serials backlog

What types of materials are being backlogged?	Count	Percentage
A. Print Serials	40	29.41
B. Analyzed Serials	12	8.82
C. Foreign language materials	17	12.50
D. Software	7	5.15
E. Gifts	35	25.74
F. Other	25	18.38

TABLE 3. Responses from libraries: causes
of the serials backlog

What factors do you believe have caused the backlog?	Count	Percentage
A. Budget	20	15.62
B. Staffing	59	46.09
C. MARC records not available	14	10.94
D. Check-in problems	13	10.16
E. Other	22	17.19

included factors such as the loading of electronic serials and physical space constraints (see Table 3).

- Most of the libraries (60%) did not provide public access to their backlog. Some 30% of libraries had limited circulation of back-logged materials, and 10% reported that backlogged materials were open to the public and circulated.
- Most of the libraries stored backlogged items randomly on book trucks, in boxes, or in piles, all of which were included in the "Other" category of Table 4. Materials might also be assigned accession numbers and stored in numerical order. For electronic serials online spreadsheets were maintained listing titles to be loaded. Some libraries stored items by date of receipt, in alphabetical order by title, or arranged in subject categories.
- Fifty-nine libraries responded to the question regarding any plans they had to reduce their backlogs. The primary response seems to be that they were slowly working through the backlogs as time permitted. Changes in technical services workflows, shifting priorities, and the

TABLE 4. Responses from libraries: storage
of backlogged items

How are backlogged materials stored?	Count	Percentage
A. Alphabetical order	12	18.18
B. Subject categories	2	3.03
C. Date of receipt	17	25.76
D. Other	35	53.03

hiring of new staff when the budget allowed had reduced backlogs in some libraries. Outsourcing and MARC record services proved to be viable solutions. Twelve libraries replied they had no plans to reduce their backlogs.

Types of Libraries with Backlogs

Table 1 shows the number of libraries that answered "yes" to having a serials backlog. The percentage reflects the portion of the libraries in each category ("Type of Library") that had a backlog. Two-thirds (66.67%) of the special libraries that responded had serials backlogs. In part, the backlogs were attributed to inadequate staffing levels and, to a lesser extent, to the nature of the materials in them. Many of the special libraries had foreign material, rare print matter, and serials that required analyzing. The backlogs continued to grow as full MARC records only gradually became available. This was preventing the staff responsible from providing access to the material.

University libraries with FTE of over 10,000 were another category that had backlogs (47.31%). Staffing and budget were the primary reasons cited for the backlogs in most of the university libraries. The print materials in the backlogs were mainly gifts requiring expert evaluation. Electronic serials added to the problem when load times from the providers were slow, holding up the registration of e-journals and their access in the library systems. Universities that did not have substantial backlogs attributed this to efficient workflows in technical services coupled with sufficient staffing. Some universities also outsourced technical processing to their subscription agents.

None of the public libraries that responded to the survey had a serials backlog. One library referred to a previous backlog in government documents and maps processing, which was later eliminated. Apparently staffing was not an issue for the public libraries surveyed. Also, a large part of their collections is popular fiction and other material that has LC copy readily available.

Materials in the Backlog

Close to 40% of the responding libraries acknowledged that they had some type of serials backlog. Of the 60% that responded that they did not have a backlog, 13 libraries qualified their answers. These libraries had small backlogs (less than 200 items) that they did not consider serious. These backlogs consisted of older materials requiring original cataloging

in accordance with collection development policies, or serials that had undergone title or format changes. Many items were gifts that needed to be evaluated. There might be a small, routine backlog of periodicals being prepared for binding or of standing orders to be added to the collection. Serials record cleanup from automating the catalog was ever present. Many libraries checked in materials the day they arrived, and then had them physically processed when student workers were available. If there were no students, the process could get behind schedule. It was stated that outsourcing could relieve pressure on the staff and prevents items from building up.

By far the largest portion of serials backlogs was comprised of print matter and gifts (see Table 2). The gifts, which needed to be evaluated for retention, were considered low-priority items. Foreign-language materials and rare items required original cataloging if cataloging records were not available. Other special-collection materials were also a source of back-logged items because they might be local materials specific to the institution and therefore require original cataloging. Analyzed serials, too, contributed to the backlog. Thirteen libraries stated that there could be a backlog of electronic serials because of their processing. Electronic serials need to be registered and should be loaded every month. These steps created backlogs due to slow response times from the providers, which in turn slowed down the cataloging department workflows. Also, many of the individual electronic titles in aggregators needed to be cataloged.

Causes of the Backlog

Libraries were asked to consider four factors or a combination of the four that they believed led to formation of the backlog (see Table 3). Staffing (46.09%) was rated the overall contributing factor, followed by budget, unavailability of MARC records, and check-in problems. The "Other" category included causes such as a shortage of time to review low-priority materials, lack of awareness of problems, the practice of accepting gifts, and a lack of decision makers. One library mentioned that things were often misidentified as being serials when they were not, and these ended up in the backlog. Some were so obviously not serials that technical services staff suspected that items were put there in hopes that they would not be seen. Many items were placed in the backlog for over two years as the department looked for a serials cataloger qualified to make the decision. Several libraries emphasized the point that decision makers were simply not available to make determinations regarding the

serials in the backlogs. Often, however, there was a qualified person on staff, but backlogged materials were low priority compared to current standing orders.

The practice of accepting gifts, which might include large discarded sets from other libraries, compounded the backlog problems. Unless a specific acquisitions or collection development policy was in place, gifts were accepted and added to the backlog for someone to review. The workflows in technical services seldom could accommodate these low-priority items, and so they built up. No procedures appeared to be in place for the evaluation and processing of items other than currently received subscriptions and standing orders. References were made to specific instances where supervisors wanted to review everything, with no other staff members being allowed to perform the evaluation duties. The problem was thus centered on two things: the personnel to review the items for retention, and the time needed to do so. According to Fischer and Lugg, in a production-oriented workflow, the organization must be willing to rely on a process rather than a person.[9] Unfortunately, many librarians cannot bring themselves to throw things out, causing materials to accumulate.

Many backlogged items with serials check-in problems were the result of migrations to new integrated library systems, creating serials cleanup situations. Technical services staff need to be retrained and workflows restructured. Serials find their way into cataloging backlogs when MARC records are not available in OCLC, or when these records are available but require downloading to a new system. Time and expertise are required of the cataloging staff. As backlogged materials age, though, some problems, such as lack of adequate cataloging copy, have a way of resolving themselves. After several years MARC records for many items should be available. Moreover, print items in backlogs may now be available online; therefore, the retention of the print items can be reconsidered.

Electronic serials play a significant part in backlog formation. Staff may not be aware of the extent of the backlog because of e-journals' lack of a physical presence. Providers of OpenURL link resolvers are slow to add titles, which in turn slows down the importing of records to the system. Compounding the situation is the fact that large groups of electronic resources may be acquired in a single package rather than individually. Several libraries pointed out that electronic serials from aggregators and other services should be loaded every month. Backlogs seemed to be created by the slowness of the link servers and the libraries' own cataloging departments.

Storage and Access

Most libraries that responded to the survey had closed backlogs that were inaccessible to the public either physically or through an online catalog. Almost 30% of responding libraries had some form of limited circulation via brief acquisition records in the OPAC. Very few (10%) had opened up their backlogs to the public. Storage of backlogged volumes was limited in most libraries due to space. In some instances, older items might present a mold danger and have to be fumigated. The majority of libraries responded that items were stored randomly around the department with no real system or order, reducing the chances of any type of organized evaluation of the collections (see the Table 4 "Other" category). In some libraries, backlogged items might be stored by date of receipt or accession number, or arranged in alphabetical order or subject categories. Cursory prioritizing of items assisted with later evaluation and processing of backlogs. Some libraries maintained lists or spreadsheets of backlogged materials, be they print or electronic. For electronic serials, paper files of titles to be added to the knowledgebase might be kept so order records could be attached. In the meantime, electronic titles might also be available on aggregator sites, on publishers' websites, and through listing services other than the ones the libraries currently used.

Strategies for Management

The survey gave librarians the opportunity to discuss their plans and strategies to resolve the backlogs in their libraries. The ideal solution would seem to be to hire new staff whenever possible, as the budget allowed. However, by far the major response was to have available staff gradually work through the backlog as time permitted, usually during slow times such as summer and winter breaks, or during lulls in the acquisitions cycle. Many said they got to it when they could, because the backlog was considered low priority. It was on everyone's "to do" list. Many libraries had restructured the workflows in technical services. One library dissolved the serials cataloging unit and put the personnel in other units. It then trained interested members in those units to catalog serials. All new hires were expected to catalog serials as part of the normal activities, which turned out to be very successful. Another library did something similar by training lower-level staff to do basic editing of the brief receipt records.

Libraries have become creative in their solutions to the backlog dilemma. Many libraries do not have the budget to hire additional staff,

and so they reallocate current staff by shifting priorities in the processing workflow. To deal with a large gift of books and serials, one library started having the entire staff (non-administrative librarians and paraprofessionals) spend one hour per week on the project, which was to take months to complete. The gifts had to be stored in another department on campus and were not piled up in the technical services area. As for that library's print serials processing backlog, the regular serials staff was continuing to chip away at it.

Other libraries turned their backlogs into special projects and had several people working on them. Some incorporated such materials into the normal workflows to avoid future backlogs. It was also suggested that a library student could do an internship to help with gifts; however, that would require additional staff time to set this up and monitor the intern.

For electronic serials, users do have access through the link resolver, in which packages of titles can be loaded quite easily. One library looked into a MARC record service and coverage service. Registration of new journals by one of the staffers would eventually be incorporated into the technical services workflow.

The main priority should be to gain control over current operations. Eliminating backlogs and revamping procedures in technical services are necessary to catch up with the workload. Fischer and others contend that backlogs can be eliminated by changing either the process or the product (that is, the level of cataloging that a library can afford).[10]

SUMMARY

Library backlogs may include both print and electronic serials. With limited budgets and staff, libraries participating in the survey have developed several innovative solutions to serials backlog management. In summary, these are:

- Ideally, hire additional staff when the budget permits to eliminate the backlog of serials.
- Reallocate and retrain current staff, including paraprofessionals, to focus on the backlog and steadily work through it as time permits.
- Turn the backlog into a special project that can be handled with paraprofessionals, student workers, and interns.

- Shift priorities and improve workflows in technical services so that the processing of serials in the backlog is incorporated into the normal routine workflow of the department. This becomes a preventative measure to avoid a future backlog.
- Invest in a MARC record service or an e-resource management service for electronic serials, which has proven beneficial to keep pace with the loading of e-journal titles.
- Operate under the status quo with no formal plan to tackle the backlog to reduce or eliminate it; rely on changes in cataloging rules to resolve some issues when the material is reassessed.

This study has revealed various strategies for serials backlog management. Libraries are aware of their backlogs of serials and are making progress toward reducing and possibly eliminating them through the implementation of creative solutions. It must be said, however, that the necessity of eliminating a backlog may no longer be relevant if it is under control and the materials are in some way accessible to the public.[11]

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