

# Is the term ‘serials’ relevant any longer? Some thoughts on the matter...

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## Key points

- The term ‘serial’ is becoming obsolete largely because what was once a dominant paper-based medium for communicating has been replaced by a complex ecosystem of online information sources, social media, digital subscription packages, databases, and emerging new formats.
- While the term serial, associated with publishing in neat instalments, may be fading, the notion of serializing remains very hot.
- For many users, the ‘serial’ – or what is left of it – persists only as a Cheshire Cat smile, a mystifying element that must be included as part of the student’s properly structured citation.
- Although seriality is still a valid concept, in the technical environment, there are hints that ‘serial’ might be replaced by new phrases that include the term ‘diachronic’.

## INTRODUCTION

What’s in a name? In the past decade or more, there has been a decided shift in the way publications that historically have been known as serials are presented, managed, and accessed. Concurrently, the term ‘serial’ is less often used, whether in job titles, workflows, or even in cataloguing environments. Is the term ‘serial’ becoming obsolete because the publication format is fading or morphing or because, although in reality serials still exist, the term is simply out of fashion?

The word ‘serial’ as a noun has definite historic roots. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)’s earliest example of ‘serial’ used as a noun for ‘journal’ dates from 1834: ‘Bristol Mercury 8 Nov. The number for November of the third division of this serial is entirely devoted to the article [on] birds’. A citation from 1852 is even closer to recent library usage: ‘Jrnl. Psychol. Med. & Mental Pathol. 5 461 The “Annales Medico-Psychologiques”, the “Annales d’Hygiene Publique et de Médecine Legale”, and other scientific serials.’ The most recent citation dates from a 1981 article in *American Libraries*: ‘May 262/3 Duties: all original cataloging of monographs, serials, and non-book materials’ (OED, [n.d.](#)).

The term ‘serial’ has been most commonly used during at least the past several decades as the broadest library term that encompasses publications that continue over time and are published in successive volumes or issues with no predetermined conclusion. This umbrella term covers a range of specific types of serials such as journals, magazines, newspapers, and annual reports but

also blogs, zines, and other online forms. Another broad term, not as limited to libraries, is ‘periodical’, which usually denotes serials such as journals and magazines, although ‘periodical’ and ‘serial’ are often used interchangeably in less technical situations. In this article, ‘serial’ is used in its broadest library meaning.

The online environment has also given rise to other types of publications that exhibit seriality – they persist in adding new content over time – but avoid discrete issues in favour of seamlessly integrating new material into the whole. This pattern even exists in the print world in the form of loose-leaf services but is more common online in the form of databases and web sites. The collective cataloguing term for publications that exhibit seriality without meeting the definition of serial is ‘integrating resources’. The fact that such resources may be eclipsing more traditional forms of publication is also likely contributing to the obsolescence of both the form and the term ‘serial’. The broadest library term for publications that exhibit seriality is ‘continuing resource’, a term that covers both serials and integrating resources.

Are changes in serials themselves, as they are traditionally formatted, affecting only the term by which we know them or, more significantly, affecting how this historic form of publication is perceived? Does the decline in the use of the term ‘serial’ threaten the very existence of serials? What might the consequences of this shift in terminology and perception mean for publishers, libraries, scholars, or the consuming public? Both authors have published on this topic in the past, and it seemed a good time revisit the question (Cook, [2007](#); Reynolds, Chesler, & Beck, [2009](#)). In an attempt to explore these questions anew, the authors reached out to a number of thought leaders in the information community to see what reflections they might have on the following question: *‘Is the term ‘serial’ obsolete or becoming so?’ If yes, why? And if no, why not?’*

We collected statements from the eight individuals (listed in the Notes) who represent both publisher and librarian viewpoints, including two people who work for the ISSN International Centre in Paris. They provided us with personal observations – some quite informal – rather than statements based on research or statements representing the companies or institutions where they are employed. Although the various themes discussed in this article emerged from their statements, we were also pleased and somewhat surprised to discover a rather clear answer to our question. The term ‘serial’ is becoming obsolete largely because what was once a dominant paper-based medium for communicating scholarship, current information, events, news, and analysis has now been replaced by a complex ecosystem of online information sources, social media, digital subscription packages, databases, and emerging new formats. These new resources have rendered both the term and what that term referred to, if not completely obsolete, certainly on the way to obsolescence.

## **DISCUSSION**

Publications continue to exhibit seriality but most are not serials anymore

Seriality – the quality of being issued in continuing or updating parts – remains important, but the dynamics of publishing open-ended resources has vastly changed in the digital age. As Robert Boissy, Director of Account Development, Springer Nature wrote, ‘While the term serial, associated with publishing in neat installments, may be fading, the notion of serializing remains very hot’. The rise of ‘mega-journals’ – that is, named databases that encompass articles from a great many journals – was mentioned several times, while data sets, blogs, podcasts, and other types of online continuing resources have become commonplace. The traditional concept of a serial with regular volumes, numbering, and frequency has given way to more amorphous entities that are harder to pin down. The term ‘mega-journal’ is more commonly used to describe journals such as PLOS One and Scientific Reports, but here is used to describe large article and journal aggregations that together form a pseudo-journal by the nature of their collection.

In fact, the point was made by Ed Jones, Associate Director, Assessment and Technical Services, National University, that today’s students often never realize that scholarly journals ever appeared in print at all! ‘Most students using online libraries encounter not journals but a swarm of articles served up by their library discovery service ... a one-off-on-the-fly journal created for just that user in just that context. For that user, [the student] the “serial” or what’s left of it – persists only as a Cheshire Cat smile, a mystifying element that must be included as part of the student’s properly structured citation’.

The concept of publishing a set collection of works on a regular frequency (monthly, quarterly, etc.) continues to slip as articles appear early as pre-prints or come online only as they are ready. Furthermore, articles and other short-form pieces may be revised or appended, creating a whole new and never-ending revision process. As Clément Oury, head of the Data, Network and Standards Department at the ISSN International Centre stated, ‘The traditional notion of serials is challenged. New forms are arising, such as blogs or “mega-journals.” Even the more traditional journals (which are still published in print form) are evolving. For example, the “continuous publication model” where an article is published online as soon as it is ready; and then, afterwards, “wrapped into an issue.” The serial is not obsolete in scholarly publishing, but the traditional serial is not predominant anymore. It is part of an ecosystem of scholarly publications, along with other publications – publication of raw research data, social media, etc.’

Jill Emery, Collection Development & Management Librarian, Portland State University, observed that with the change from print to online publishing came a host of other changes that challenged the concept and term. She wrote, ‘The scholarly works, themselves, no longer needed to be packaged and produced the same way they had been previously in print. One example, datasets, can be broken out and produced both in a continuous manner and as stand-alone entities. Many “journals” are now composite entities, made up of multi-faceted works/subject areas and referred to as “mega journals.” As more scholarly content is produced digitally, the packaging and descriptive constructs of the previous era no longer seem as relevant ...’

Steve Shadle, Serials Access Librarian, University of Washington, and former ISSN cataloguer, focused on the multiple information sources available today: ‘The word “serial” has become a not-preferred term precisely because it identifies an ever-decreasing proportion of scholarly information and publishing. For newspapers, this is especially true as evidenced not only in the decline of printed newspapers but also in the decline of newspaper publishing in general. As more

people rely on social media and web sources to meet their information needs (whether professional or personal), traditional publishing models (including the publication of serials) are being replaced by other models’.

And so, if as it seems, the ecosystem of scholarly research and publishing is now an unending stream of raw data, data sets, and other flotsam that is pushing the traditional serial and its name towards obsolescence, do we need a new term to refer collectively to these new forms of publishing?

### Focus on articles and packages of journals rather than individual journals

Several observers mentioned that title-by-title management of journals has given way to electronic management of packages or suites of products that may include many entities of various stripes. Dan Tonkery, President/CEO, Content Strategies, commented, ‘How serials are sold and managed is the big change. Most serials or journals are sold as part of a publisher database. Some libraries still attempt to manage their serials or journal collection on a title-by-title basis. However, I think the individual title management phase is passing’. Peter Burnhill, former director of The Keeper’s Registry, has often observed that ‘the article is the object of desire’ (Burnhill, [2012](#)). Ed Jones explained, ‘At my library, most of our journals come as part of publisher packages such as SAGE Premier or collections such as JSTOR or Project MUSE. In our COUNTER reports, most “serials” reside in the long tail of usage, with only a handful of articles actually viewed. While individual journals get little use, in the aggregate, the package delivers. But again, the “serial” as a meaningful concept is undermined’.

### ‘Serial’ has long been used primarily in libraries and related communities but is fading even there

Shadle raised a good point: ‘To ask the question about whether the word “serial” is obsolete is to assume that is wasn’t obsolete at some point’. Many of the comments received from our contributors indicated that librarians, publishers, and vendors have spoken and written about ‘serials’, but students, researchers and the general public have not. Shadle’s comment indicated that they never really did. It would seem that the term is now disappearing from even the library world for everyday management of these materials.

We note that two prominent professional library and library industry-related associations that formerly dealt exclusively with serials have now removed that term from their names. The former North American Serials Interest Group has officially become simply ‘NASIG’. The former UK Serials Group is now UKSG. UKSG’s official publication, formerly titled *Serials*, was renamed *Insights* in 2012. The American Library Association’s ALCTS Serials Section was renamed the Continuing Resources Section in 2007. A regional conference known as the North Carolina Serials Conference has not yet changed its name as of this writing, but its planning committee has discussed the idea. And then there is ER&L – Electronic Resources in Libraries, which never used the word ‘serials’, and instead focuses on electronic resources.

Boissy observed, ‘The term “serial” to signify a continuously published resource was always marginal in all but the world of librarianship and very closely related fields ... Therefore, the

question of the use of “serial” can only be examined within librarianship and it feels like with the passing of print journals in academic libraries that much of the identity of serials has been lost. ... It does seem that words like electronic resources, metadata, and assessment are having their day. E-book and e-journal are with us for the time being ... The drive at [library] conferences has been to kind of group issues relating to electronic resources into one event, with very porous borders’.

## Absence of the term in job titles and workflows

The word has all but disappeared in the way workflows are described and also from job titles. In its place, the terms ‘continuing resources’ and ‘e-resources’ have become prevalent. The rise of web sites and databases as potential cataloguing objects prompted the birth of the term ‘continuing resources’ during the revision of AACR2 that culminated in the 2002 edition. The term was agreed upon by the ISBD, ISSN, and AACR communities as an umbrella term to encompass ongoing publications issued in discrete successive parts – ‘serials’ – plus ongoing publications where new content was seamlessly integrated into a whole – ‘integrating resources’ – such as print loose-leaves, databases, and websites. Accordingly, many job titles and workflows now use the term ‘continuing resources’.

Emery commented: ‘For most of the 20th century in academic librarianship in North America, at least, serials or continuing resources are complex enough resources to warrant a specialization of staff ... In most academic libraries there was a serials department that was distinguished from the monographs department or the people who managed and dealt solely with books ... There aren’t many serials librarians or serials staff left at this point. With regard to job descriptions in academic libraries, the term has grown to be obsolete. The term serials has been replaced by either electronic resources librarians/staff or by continuing resources librarians/staff. So, in answering this question I would say that as a paraprofessional or professional avenue of expertise in academia, the word has been supplanted’. Tonkery put it more simply, ‘The serials librarian of the past has been replaced by the e-resources librarian. Many of the serials librarian skills are transferable to the e-resources librarian’. Laurie Kaplan, ProQuest/Ulrich’s observed, ‘When I was hired, [15 years ago by Bowker] my title was Director of Serials Editorial. Now our titles focus on Content or Metadata’.

A 2013 article by Heather Getsay and Catherine Rudowsky also analysed whether or not job postings in the United States and elsewhere were using the word ‘serials’ (Getsay & Rudowsky, [2013](#)). Our interviews confirm the trend they discovered – that the word ‘serial’ continues to lose its appeal.

## Technical versus non-technical use of the term

Ed Jones reminisced about the technical meaning of the term in a cataloguing context: ‘I think a lot depends on what we mean by “serial”. Historically, it is meant something that is published over time in a sequence of units, united by a common title and—hopefully—some form of unit numbering, usually shelved together and expected to continue indefinitely. (Today that all sounds so quaint. I have vague memories ...)’.

As the term ‘serial’ has been most often used in a technical cataloguing context to denote a category of resource to be acquired, catalogued, indexed, and otherwise treated according to a set of protocols appropriate for its form, it needs to be noted here that a new term – used in the beta version of RDA – has risen over the bibliographic horizon: ‘diachronic work’. This term indicates a work that changes over time. Such works can be either determinate – with a predetermined conclusion – or indeterminate, with no such conclusion. To capture all the characteristics of ‘serial,’ one has to also include the concept that new content is added in a mode that uses succession. Stringing these concepts together one discovers that what has traditionally been called a serial can be regarded in the beta version of RDA as an indeterminate diachronic successive work. Will this phrase replace ‘serial’ in future cataloguing discussions? Might such a phrase clarify the nature of these works for improved understanding or, conversely intimidate the faint of heart who are already often scared away by the relatively benign term ‘serial?’

Outside of the highly technical environment of serials cataloguing and its standards (the *Resource Description and Access (RDA)*, ISBD) but still within the library and related environments, the term ‘serial’ can be used more generally to encompass a wider range of publications that continue indefinitely. Although the coverage of ISSN was broadened in the early 2000s to encompass new publishing formats, the term ‘serial’ is still part of the ISSN name, and thus, the publications to which ISSN are assigned are generally thought of as serials, as evident in remarks shared by Gaëlle Béquet, Director of the ISSN International Centre. She told us ‘Serials are not obsolete because the ISSN network assigns 70,000 ISSN to serials every year for print and digital publications across the globe; they are indeed becoming more diverse with, for example, academic repositories and scholarly blogs taking momentum. Seriality is evolving: the publication plan of a journal is more compelling with a given frequency of publication and a program defining the structure of the journal content which is shaped by the editor-in-chief and the scientific committee. Academic repositories do not have the same constraints because updates are irregular and uploaded by numerous parties; these updates may not be monitored by repository managers but rather by machines which check the technical relevance of the files and of the metadata supplied by the researcher. Same remark about blogs; authors do not commit themselves to posting news at a regular pace but rather when they have reached a certain stage in their work and are looking for comments to move forward’.

### Brand recognition is still important for scholarly works

The importance of journal and magazine titles still exists (and is important to publishers and academics), but this is not necessarily connected to ‘serials’ in the mind of the end user.

Robert Boissy told us, ‘Publishers may not be fearful of new formats (long articles, short books, videos, data sets) but they are very keen to maintain their brands. The names of publishing houses, imprints, journal names and book series names will live for as long as publishers can make them live. It is not generally expected that the majority of undergraduates will establish any appreciation for these brand names but it is expected that those with a doctorate will know and care ...’

Ed Jones wrote, ‘I can imagine most scholarly journals eventually merging into publisher-based mega journals, sliced and diced for different markets. Flagship journals like *Nature* and *Science*

will survive, but I suspect part of this will be due to the way they have evolved online, as well as the way they continually market themselves to the media and broader public.... Their online versions are scholarly funhouses, continually updated with news items, publicity releases, interviews, early publication of research papers (only later and retroactively assigned to an “issue”), corrigenda and addenda that may be integrated into the original paper and a panoply of supporting materials (database, videos, etc. available only to online users)’.

## ‘Serial’ is still in formal use but for how long?

Where the term ‘serial’ still prevails is in formal settings where those in charge have not been willing or able to change yet. The Bowker/Ulrich’s Serials Librarianship Award has retained the term, as well as journals such as *Serials Review* and *Serials Librarian* and the listserv, SERIALST. ISSN still stands for International Standard Serial Number despite having encompassed the entire range of continuing resources. A search of the beta version of the cataloguing code, *Resource Description and Access (RDA)*, turns up 134 instances of “serial” and 14 instances of ‘diachronic’, a new term explained previously. However, this is likely because sections dealing with diachronic resources are still incomplete. It also may be a reflection of the reluctance of the RDA Serials Task Force (in which Regina Reynolds and Ed Jones were participants) to completely abandon the word, ‘serial’. One possible future for the term “serial” was pointed out by Jill Emery: ‘The term is obsolete for the current scholarship many scholars are ... engaged with. However, in providing description and indicators of scholarly work from prior centuries, the word is still relevant and useful’. Ed Jones summed up the answer to our original question succinctly, ‘I don’t think the term “serial is obsolete, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it gradually became so, at least in the area of scholarly publishing’.

## CONCLUSION

For many decades, ‘serial’ has been a technical umbrella term for a variety of publications with specific names in popular use: magazine, newspaper, journal, newsletter, annual report, bulletin, gazette, periodical, or review. The term met a need to refer collectively to a group of publications that exhibited certain characteristics in order to provide for their cataloguing, acquisitions, indexing, and other processing – primarily in libraries or associated fields. Although there have been online serials at least since the 1980s (even before the Web), the word ‘serial’ has continued to largely connote paper-based publications. The decline in usage and perception of the word “serial” seems a result of the digital revolution in publishing and the ongoing evolution of new forms of online publishing. More simply, as the thing referred to has become increasingly less common, not surprisingly, the word has become less common as well.

Outside of the cataloguing world, publishers and vendors now focus on how to package, market, present, and innovate digital formats. To students and young researchers who may have never seen rows of bound journals on a library shelf, both the word and the thing are alien, and it is difficult to connect to the words and images that almost magically appear on the screen of their chosen device. The word serial may become one of those words that are perfectly useful in a historical context, such as “codex” is for books, but irrelevant for discussing current publishing or library processing. Although seriality is still a valid concept, it is being transformed into something even more fluid than originally envisioned, with the word serial marginalized to the

technical world of cataloguing paper publications and those who deal with them. Even in that technical environment, there are hints that ‘serial’ might be replaced by new phrases that include the term ‘diachronic’. This new term might be a useful technical term in the future but likely will only be familiar to librarians and others in the publishing industry such as ‘serials’ has been in the past.

As the digital environment continues to evolve, it is likely that the questions about words for digital things and the digital things themselves posed at the beginning of this article will continue to be raised. Will there be cases where old words take on new meanings, such as ‘dial’ as in ‘dialing a phone?’ or ‘text?’ Or will innovative words need to be minted to align with new formats and concepts? We suspect that, like the publications formerly known as serials, these questions will continue indefinitely.

## NOTES

The following individuals were directly quoted in this piece, with permission. All quotes are from email correspondence with the exception of Emery (cited below).

- Gaëlle Béquet, Director, ISSN International Centre, France
- Robert Boissy, Director of Account Development, Springer Nature, USA
- Jill Emery, Collection Development & Management Librarian, Portland State University, USA. Emery’s comments in their entirety can be found in her blog post: Emery, J. (2018, 31 July). Our Ever Changing Terminology. Retrieved from: <http://ntkl.tumblr.com/post/176498277190/our-ever-changing-terminology>
- Ed Jones, Associate Director, Assessment and Technical Services, National University, USA
- Laurie Kaplan, Content Business Analyst Lead, Proquest, USA
- Clément Oury, Head of the Data, Network and Standards Department, ISSN International Centre, France
- Steve Shadle, Interim Head and Serials Access Librarian, University of Washington, USA
- Dan Tonkery, President/CEO, Content Strategies, USA

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