

# Drinking From The Firehose — The Serial's Life Cycle: The Report of Its Death has been Greatly Exaggerated

Column Editor: **Eleanor Cook** (Appalachian State University, Boone, NC) <cookei@appstate.edu>

The Serial as we know it has been doing some strange things lately, and since this observation is actually being published in a print serial, it will be subject to the very conditions to which the ailing serial is coming under assault — perhaps you can understand the irony of the situation.

The death of the Serial has been greatly exaggerated, to borrow a turn of phrase from **Mark Twain**. While the concept of seriality continues to hold significance in today's information flow, the word has become jaded. "Serial" is about to become interred in the obsolescence graveyard along with our friends "Buggy whip," "CRT" and "Acoustic Coupler."

At my own institution, we are reorganizing again. We first reorganized over ten years ago. Back in 1995, we created a new name for "technical services." We started with: **Materials Acquisitions & Processing**. Shortly after the first reorganization was completed the name was shortened and the word "acquisitions" was jettisoned. I wrote an article in 1996 called "Reorganization revisited; or, is acquisitions an endangered species?"<sup>1</sup> This time around, the word "acquisitions" has done an about-face and is once again in vogue, and instead "serials" has become the word to remove from our vocabulary and from the organizational chart.

The new team will be called "Bibliographic Services" or some variation of this, and will consist of two units — Cataloging/Metadata and Acquisitions (which will include Document delivery/ILL borrowing). Serial functions will be spread across these two functional areas. At least this is my understanding of what will happen, although the details are yet to be addressed.

Speaking of renaming serials, there was a decision made this summer by **ALA's Association for Collections & Technical Services (ALCTS)** to rename their Serials Section "Continuing Resources." I happened to be a member of the committee that made this recommendation. However, no one at my institution has expressed interest in adopting this new terminology — instead, they seem more enthralled in labeling people and things with the "e" prefix.

For example, we now have an "E-Learning" Librarian. For awhile during reorganization

discussions, the acquisitions position was titled the "Acquisitions and E-Resources" Lead Librarian. The word "serials" has become sidelined for extinction. It is as though serials have ceased to exist.

Why is this? Most of the products we manage through subscription these days are electronically delivered. Databases and electronic journal packages dominate our budget expenditures. This tends to be true for most academic institutions, no matter the size. Even eBooks are often serials these days, in that many times you pay an annual subscription fee for their access.

The print journal collection is rapidly shrinking. Of course, we still get printed versions of little poetry and art journals and popular news magazines and such, along with a number of academic standbys, mostly in the humanities and social sciences. But we are moving major scholarly journals to "Online Only" as fast as possible. It is an expensive challenge to move to "e." Even **Katina** wants to take **ATG** to the e-cutting edge, but she can tell you about how complicated it can be on a shoe-string budget.

The other print serial that is moving towards dinosaur status is the reference standing order. How many of these do you still have? Most of these materials are being replaced by databases and Websites.

However, seriality is still an important concept in our information world. Electronic journals still act like print journals in that they change titles, change frequency and change publishers. These aspects continue to bedevil those of us who manage their care and feeding. Unfortunately, many of our colleagues have no clue about the details of managing continuing resources (electronic or otherwise) and aren't always aware of the impact these variations have on access. But they are grateful that someone "back" in technical services (or whatever you are calling it these days) is aware and is keeping them up and running.

So — if you happen to be an administrator who still likes to look at print matter and you are reading this, please do not kill off your serials department. Rename it, if you must — but don't think you can make serials go away. They will come back to bite you if you throw the administration of serial products on to the backs of staff and librarians who don't really understand the nuances of seriality. As my colleague **Kay Johnson (Radford U.)** recently quipped, books are mortals and serials are immortals — how apt this comparison is!

Serials are immortal because they never die. Even those who go into hibernation by slowing their output to almost nothing often times revive themselves later. Monographic works, regardless of their format, have a definite beginning, middle and end. Monographs are like us humans — Serials are more like Gods. (I guess this makes eBooks some kind of half-breeds.)

Therefore, make sure to treat your electronic products like the serials they are and respect their immortality. Those of us who have been managing serials for awhile should be kept around at least long enough during the reorganization so that it all doesn't come to a grinding halt (after all, the serials may be immortal, but we humans are not!) I am being reorganized into the realm of copyright and intellectual property, which is interestingly relevant to serials. In fact, I know several serials librarians who have made this career move. So I have no reason to complain — the pay is the same and I still have tenure. And fortunately those who will inherit my workload are energetic and smart and want to learn all about it. For that I am very grateful.

So be sensitive to seriality, no matter how "e" things become. If not, I suspect the Gods will have their way. 🍷



## Endnotes

1. **Cook, Eleanor I.** Reorganization revisited; or, is acquisitions an endangered species? *Library Acquisitions: Practice & Theory*, Volume 20, Issue 1, Spring 1996, Pages 77-84.