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Review of *Report of the ARL Serials Prices Project.*

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Report of the ARL Serials Prices Project. Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries, 1989. 114 pp. $60.00.

If you feel, after your latest cruise through your research library, that you were adrift in a very expensive sea of paper, you are certainly not alone. As a researcher at a research university, it is very easy to use the resources of your library and to be confronted with the funding problems of that library only as those problems affect your particular area of interest. In recent years most researchers at universities have been told that subscriptions to journals will have to be cut in their area and that less of the library materials budget will be available to them for the purchase of monographs. These two problems are parts of larger troubles tied directly to the fact that funding for materials and library construction in the 1970s and 1980s has not come close to keeping up with rising costs at all or nearly all United States research libraries.

The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) compiled a volume that addressed one key part of the cost squeeze on libraries: serials pricing. It includes an ARL staff overview and summary, resolutions and recommendations by members, and contractor reports by Economic Consulting Services, Inc., and by Ann Okerson. Economic Consulting Services Inc. (ECS) was hired by ARL in 1988 to analyze serials prices and costs over time. In the resulting report, *A Study of Trends in Average Prices and Costs of Certain Serials Over Time*, ECS selected for study four major commercial publishing houses which produce many science and

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technology serials. These publishers, located in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, West Germany, and the United States, respectively, increased their subscription prices for serials at a much greater rate than their increases in costs according to the ECS study. ECS also discussed the two-tier pricing structure used by foreign publishers which places an extra charge on U.S. subscribers. Ann Okerson's report, *Of Making Many Books There is No End*, put the serials crisis in historical perspective, noting that a phenomenon similar to the escalation in prices in the 1980s occurred in the 1920s, and 1930s. She attributed the increases in the 1980s to multiple factors involving problems at the consumer and research systems levels as well as problems in economics. She said that five principal causes of the crisis are proliferation in titles; the increasing size and/or frequency of issues; the concentration of the increases in the expensive fields of sciences, technology, and medicine; the move of commercial international profit-seeking publishers into serials publication; and the practice, particularly by these publishing houses, of setting a differential pricing structure that forces research libraries in the United States to pay much higher prices than paid for the same serials by libraries in other nations.

The ARL proposed a series of strong actions based on the recommendations in the two reports to try to stop or reverse the trend of annually spending proportionately more money to buy fewer serials and monographs for less and less comprehensive collections. These included educating researchers about the problem and actions needed to remedy it, taking actions to achieve price reductions particularly in serials published by commercial publishing houses, examining with scholarly groups the scholarly publishing process and the ways to manage the seemingly ever increasing volume of publications.

Since the May 1989 publication of the ARL report, several comments have been published in reaction to it including one by Eugene Garfield in *The Scientist* (24 July 1989), and one by Philip Abelson in *Science* (9 June 1989). Both advocated a type of cost effectiveness study that would identify by some means those serials that have high cost and low readership. These means might include looking at the number of times works are cited in *Science Citation Index* (SCI) compared to the cost of the serial in which they are published. High cost/low use serials could be cut when budget cutting time comes around.

In my field of the geological sciences, all it takes to see the reality of serial title proliferation is to go to that area of the library and count the new titles started since 1970 or to read the mailings from the publishers, commercial or otherwise. The increases in numbers and costs are indeed great, so great in fact that in only a few short years materials budgets in libraries may be entirely eaten up by the costs of serials subscriptions if the trend continues. The explanations for this knowledge explosion given by Okerson include the impact of the increased number of researchers who submit manuscripts for publication, compete for grants, and are seeking tenure and rewards in academic institutions. At least part of the increase in researchers, I believe, can be traced back to changes in the higher education system in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. Student populations at most colleges and universities increased greatly in those years and the numbers of faculty members increased as well. At the same time many colleges were renamed universities, and their roles and missions began to change to reflect this new status. In colleges where teaching excellence had formerly been the key to advancement, tenure was now based primarily on creativity demonstrated by published research. Tougher standards were established in many universities for faculty seeking to achieve tenure and advancement, and have led to calls in some quarters for extension of the traditional six year probationary period to longer periods. In reaction to the increasing number of serials and their costs at least one top administrator at the University of Nebraska has suggested that tenure be judged more on *quality* of publications rather than quantity.

Most if not all of us can agree that research libraries are our most universally important research tool. All of us have to try to find solutions to cost escalations in serials prices and to the many other funding problems faced by our libraries. I recommend the *Report of the ARL Serial Prices Project* to you. It is must reading but the price of $60 (U.S.) is a bit steep and at 114 printed pages boils down to nearly $0.53 per page.

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