Some applications software problems for libraries

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Although libraries have been users of computer software for many years, it is only recently that they have become providers, i.e. in the same way as they provide printed materials. In the plethora of software now becoming available there is emerging a 'species' (although not easy to define), falling into the larger class of application software, that libraries are beginning to acquire, store and make available for use. This form of application software, which is characterised by its analogy to audio-visual materials, raises a number of questions.

Without getting bogged down in definitions of different kinds of software, it is useful to consider application software as being programs that enable a user to achieve particular objectives (with the word 'program' considered in its widest sense) as opposed to control or systems software which performs common functions for all the users of a computer configuration. The form of application software of concern in this note usually comprises a diskette and or tape plus some printed text, forming a package designed for use by someone with little or no computing experience. I have been told, but without supporting evidence, that some packages are even portable between different brands of micros.

There are clear parallels between this form of application software and audio visual packages, an obvious example being the A/V kits that perform the same function as computerised management games. Firstly, there is in universities and colleges similar resistance to the library being the proper agency for handling such material. This is not just a matter of vested interest; many of the difficulties with which librarians in tertiary institutions had to contend regarding A/V appear to be surfacing again, not the least of these being the provision of appropriate hardware. As with A/V there are in most universities and colleges several 'experts' who seek to establish a niche in computing, but in addition the enormous pressure on every institution to rapidly upgrade its computing power is much greater than it was with A/V, thus increasing the competition for control. In particular, the spread of micro-computers throughout almost every faculty or administrative unit enlarges the demand for application software packages.

The demand for micros and software to use on them exacerbates the difficulties of knowing what is being acquired and by whom. Computer centres are attempting to stake out ownership of this sort of territory, and although many libraries eventually gained control of A/V it is unlikely that they will do so with software. On this assumption is is surely more important for the library and the computer centre to work out sensible arrangements between them that satisfy overall institute criteria.

A likely scenario is for academic libraries to develop collections of computer software of relevance to subjects taught by the university or college, particularly applications packages for student use. The size and speed of growth of such collections will clearly depend on internal
policies, but will in any case require decisions on cataloguing, lending, and similar operations. Computer centres are likely to acquire or at least approve the purchase of software for use by academics and technical staff, and will attempt to maintain registers of 'ownership'. With the inevitable increase in expenditure on computing, more pressure will be exerted by top management to ration this expenditure by requiring standardisation and control of hardware, but efforts to control the purchase of software may be less successful.

A problem that may be peculiar to my own organisation is that of funding for acquisition. Software is considered as equipment, thus placing an undue burden on funds that are already in short supply, as well as discouraging people from using library allocations. The point of mentioning this is simply to demonstrate the A/V parallel again. If funding is seen to be unrelated to the Library, as at one time it was with A/V, then software matters generally will be equally unrelated. Selection for purchase can and should be carried out by library staff, using the various directories and catalogues easily obtainable, but in a field that is developing so rapidly, and changing so fast, it will take time for library staff to learn about and thus anticipate demand.

And whilst it is often difficult for academic departments to demonstrate a case for holding significant collections of printed or even A/V materials 'in situ', the only barrier to holding computer software is the lack of appropriate hardware to go with it.

Academic libraries are therefore likely to have a shared role in the provision of applications software, and thus need to establish policies covering not only technical operations but also wider issues such as copyright and legal deposit. Some of the former have already been addressed by such bodies as the British Library(1) and the Library Association(2). There is a growing literature on the cataloguing of software(4,5). Selection and purchase has been discussed by Mason(3). Nevertheless there remain many questions that a pooling of experience might help to answer, for example, the availability of duplicate or replacement disks. Problems of selection because of the existence of different versions of the same software, by inadequate description in commercial catalogues, and often by the unavailability of 'preview', also need to be overcome.

However this note is partly directed towards discussion of the kinds of provision of software that is most appropriate to technological academic libraries. Should such libraries, for instance, acquire microcomputers and word processing for use by students in the library (as they have provided reader-printers and other A/V hardware)? And if so, should there be an element of cost recovery, particularly if some of the use is for producing better assignments or maintaining personal files? Should software be lent to students for use on their own hardware, whether this is able to access university computers or not? Should funding that until now has been put into A/V be committed to software? These are of course questions which an individual organisation must decide for itself, but they are I believe also of common interest as one aspect of how electronic publication is beginning to impact on libraries.
References


