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Biz of Acq- To Check-in or Not to Check-in

Barbara M. Pope

Pittsburg State University, bpope@pittstate.edu

Michelle Flinchbaugh

University of Maryland Baltimore County, flinchba@umbc.edu

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A Survey of Librarians on the Relevance and Necessity of Print Serials Check-in in the 21st Century Library

by **Barbara M. Pope** (Periodicals/Reference Librarian, Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, 1701 S. Broadway, Pittsburg KS 66762; Phone: 620-235-4884) <bpoppe@pittstate.edu>

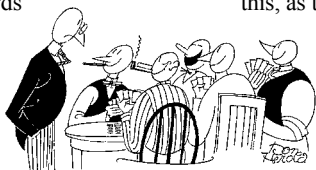
Column Editor: **Michelle Flinchbaugh** (Acquisitions Librarian, Albin O. Kuhn Library & Gallery, University of Maryland Baltimore County, 1000 Hilltop Circle, Baltimore, MD 21250; Phone: 410-455-6754; Fax: 410-455-1598) <flinchba@umbc.edu>

Abstract

It is no secret that the world of librarianship, particularly serials and online resources, has become increasingly complicated through the years. Whereas the primary goal of libraries was once ownership of print books and serials, that paradigm is shifting towards access through online serials bundles, individual online subscriptions, aggregated full-text databases, and open access serials. Thus, the serials librarians' job descriptions that once emphasized print serials check-in now likely also include electronic resource maintenance. In addition, many patrons at academic and public libraries alike gravitate towards online articles that can be downloaded for convenience. Given the changes and increasing emphasis on online access as well as issues such as budget and staffing cuts and providing patron service, we must ask ourselves whether print serials check-in is necessary or sustainable. This study explores the purpose, prevalence, and relevance of print serials check-in in libraries worldwide and asks if change is needed.

Introduction

The decreasing ownership of print serials and increasing online serials access in libraries is not a new topic. The trend began in the 1990s with aggregator databases and has been growing ever since with online serials bundles and individual subscription and open access online serials. This shift towards online access has caused libraries to shift their budgets and staffing around and, for some, to use an electronic resource management system. Many libraries still subscribe to



print serials, but some have implemented changes in processing to compensate for staffing changes and patron demands.^{1,2} In this article, this author questions the purpose of serials check-in, whether it provides access to information not available elsewhere, and if there are consequences to ceasing it.

Leading the charge behind the movement to abandon serials check-in in favor of simpler, less time-consuming processes are **Anderson** and **Zink**, who conducted an experiment to cease print serials check-in at the **University of Nevada Reno Libraries**. In a 2003 article, they challenge the necessity of serials check-in and emphasize improving patron services, including online serials and database access.³ **Carr** also notes that libraries are beginning to realize that many patrons prefer online access and are trying to appeal to that; therefore print serials check-in is becoming outdated and irrelevant.⁴ In opposition, **Borchert** tells about her library's ceasing serials check-in after data loss in an ILS migration, and the resulting problems and lack of time savings.⁵

There seems to be little doubt that most libraries consider print serials check-in to be essential, because they are still doing it despite the fact that many have access to more online serials than print and that their print and online access may overlap somewhat. As other authors, including **Stefancu**,⁶ have noted, there is almost nothing in library literature about the reason for serials check-in. A literature search confirms this, as this author was only able to find

materials on the "how." **Carr** agrees that there is no standard reason, but adds that it informs users of library holdings, enables libraries to identify problems, and records

serials purchased and received.⁷ **Anderson** and **Zink** answer the question similarly, but add that assuming that check-in data is essential for patrons is incorrect, because that "is not central to most patrons' concerns."⁸ This author will grant that patrons will likely care more about being able to use an issue than its receipt; however, if the library has serials in different formats in various locations, it is problematic finding it if no one knows if it was received or its location. In addition, **Peritore** surveyed libraries about the effect of serials check-in on reference services, and the results show that staff and patrons find the data helpful.⁹

In a 2002 article, **Anderson** gives the rationale for his library ceasing serials check-in and much of the routine binding they once did. He says that the change in processing was due to an increasing amount of online serials access and the need for staff time to set up and troubleshoot it, as well as low use of print, serials check-in not increasing access, and the expense of binding.¹⁰ He adds that some improvements appeared right away, including: issues are no longer at the bindery, funds previously spent on binding are now spent on magazine boxes, and issues get to the stacks more quickly.¹¹ However, he notes that the biggest difference is that staff who previously spent time on claiming and other issues now concentrate on online serials access.¹² He adds that if the library had more staff, they might spend more time on check-in, but print serials are used little and patrons prefer online, so the library will concentrate on that.¹³

Yue and **Kurt** reflect on **University of Nevada Reno's** changes nine years after ceasing serials check-in. They note that action may seem extreme, but it did work out despite problems.¹⁴ However, they emphasize that their approach may not work for everyone, and that libraries considering ceasing serials check-in should consider "Size and physical organization of the print serial collection, serial storage facilities, library service models, and institutional cultures."¹⁵ In an effort to assess the impact of the change on staff work and patron access, **Yue** and **Kurt** surveyed library staff. The results revealed that most staff felt that it did not negatively affect their work, but some felt that it negatively affected access.¹⁶

While ceasing serials check-in changes patron service,¹⁷ it also causes the need for change in serials processing work flow, including claiming. The **University of Nevada Reno Libraries** chose to reallocate staff to online serials management and cease most print serials check-in and claiming.¹⁸ However, **Carr**

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Further, we shared the understanding that libraries were the long-term custodians of that inestimable heritage, that library book collections were the warehouses of knowledge. All were devoted to traditional characterizations of the place of the library as the "caretaker of the vessels of culture and knowledge," the library as the "heart of the university," which seem to have become the laughing stock or the objects of mockery of many librarians deceived by the shabby doctrines of modernism. But not so

for the Argonauts — all were convinced they served a critical and honorable role in assisting in the collecting and distribution of the wealth of the culture.

All were prepared to face and deal with the risks and hazards of brokering knowledge and serving the central facilities of culture.

Does such a group of individuals possessed of those cultural understandings and commitments exist out there someplace today? We can hope there is. And if such should prove to be the case, what might the probabilities be that such individuals would choose to voluntarily coalesce in the way the Argonauts did? 🐼

notes that switching to online serials is not simple, because different skills are required.¹⁹ **Tobia and Hunnicutt's** survey of medical libraries about current print and online serials practices revealed that online serials are becoming the preferred format. In addition, some of the staff have experienced decreased workloads due to online serials, while others are overwhelmed because of them.²⁰ The authors conclude that libraries must "evaluate traditional staff activities still focused on the maintenance of shrinking print journal collections."²¹ Also affected by serials check-in is claiming. In the past, many libraries always did claiming, and while many still claim, others do not. Claiming requires time and effort, and **Anderson and Zink** note it is rarely successful.²² However, **Westfall** reports that her library discontinued claiming temporarily, which caused problems, but upon resuming, realized positive results.²³

Methods

The author chose to do a mixed-question-type survey in SurveyMonkey comprised of seven questions. While seven questions may not seem like enough to get a total picture, the author felt the need to keep the survey simple and short in order to encourage completion. The first two questions were objective and required the respondent to click a box to answer. The survey uses question logic, so if the respondent answers question two with "yes," it advances to question three, but if the answer is "no," the survey advances to question four. Question five is a follow-up to question four. Questions six and seven were follow-up questions answered by all respondents. Respondents were invited to make additional comments. The full survey is in the appendix. The survey was not intended to be truly scientific; the author wished to gauge the prevalence and relevance of serials check-in in libraries of all library types worldwide, and to establish whether changes are needed. It was the author's intent for the survey to be simple and straightforward, but the results are as varied as the libraries and their collections.

Subjects

The author chose to send the survey to the serials and technical services related email listservs *alcts-publibtechserv*, *SERIALST*, *alcts-eres*, *lita-erm*, *coll-lib*, and the *NASIG Blog*. The author sent it to several listservs and one blog in order to cast the widest net possible while also trying to limit to those responsible for serials check-in and management. It should be noted that there is likely some overlap among them, but the author requested that only one person from each library answer the survey to avoid duplication. Therefore, the subjects are all likely serials librarians or library staff responsible for serials and/or electronic resource management. The subjects were not offered, nor did they receive, any compensation for completion. They did not assume any risk, as responses were anonymous unless they chose to enter their name at the end.

Results

A total of 348 people responded to the survey, but four of the responses had to be discarded due to the respondents answering only one question, making the data useless. Also, while most respondents completed the survey, 27 respondents only answered the first two questions. However, this author did still count the responses of those answering the first two questions, but had to count their responses as either "yes" or "no" to serials check-in with a non-specific reason. Therefore, the data may be skewed.

Question one is a demographic-type question that asks in what type of library the respondent works. The 344 responses came from various library types, but were primarily academic libraries.

Academic Libraries	273	79.36%
Community College Libraries	19	5.52%
Public Libraries	7	2.03%
Research Libraries	11	3.20%
Law Libraries	15	4.36%
Corporate Libraries	4	1.16%
Other Library Types	15	4.36%

Question two asks whether the respondent's library does serials check-in. Out of 344 respondents, 97.09% from all library types answered yes. 2.91% answered no. The method of check-in (kardex or an ILS) does not make a difference, as the author is investigating the prevalence and relevance of serials check-in, not the method. The figures below are percentages of the library type responding.

Academic Libraries	266	97.44%
Community College Libraries	19	100%
Public Libraries	6	85.71%
Research Libraries	10	90.91%
Law Libraries	15	100%
Corporate Libraries	4	100%
Other Library Types	14	93.33%

Question three is an open-ended follow-up for those who answered yes to question two. 93% of those who responded in question two that their library does serials check-in answered this question. Many responded that they do so for more than one reason. The most common answers include ensuring the receipt of paid-for issues (66.57%) and keeping an updated summary of holdings display to inform staff and patrons of issues received and status (39.24%). 34.30% noted that they do so for claiming, although most noted that as a minor concern. 11.63% noted that it facilitates binding process by letting staff know it is time to bind as well as being able to change status of and track issues. 16.28% noted that they do serials check-in for auditing or budget accountability and for some it is required by law or the institution. 7.27% noted that they have no or unreliable online access and so they feel a need to maintain print holdings. Other reasons include printing labels

or routing items to a person, department, or shelving area (6.98%). 3.49% noted that it helps them spot subscription problems. 3.20% noted that they do so to help with tracking title and frequency changes. 2.33% noted that they do so to enable circulation. 1.74% said that having their serials checked in helps them with renewal and weeding decisions, as well as discarding issues of limited retention titles. 1.45% said they find statistics to be helpful, but it was not clear if it was usage or collection statistics. 1.74% said "it's always been done that way." 7.27% reported that they do serials check-in but did not give a reason. 1.16% are currently doing serials check-in, but thinking about ceasing it in the future. Still others are selective in check-in, including only checking in titles over a certain price or not checking in popular magazines.

Of the respondents who said their libraries do serials check-in, several had some interesting comments. For example, one respondent from an academic library said:

We do it because ... it has always been done. It does show ... the latest issue received, which issues we need to claim, etc. We suggested stopping check-in, but there was an uproar in Reference and other departments. ... [T]he other departments were not with us when we ran this by them...

This is interesting because it reflects that there are different viewpoints on the relevance and sustainability of check-in in the library. In addition, it shows that you must have staff buy-in in order to justify ceasing check-in. This suggests the need to ascertain how to provide the data without compromising other areas.

Question four is a follow-up question for those who answered they do not do serials check-in. Of those 10 libraries that said their libraries currently do not do serials check-in, 90% answered this question. Two libraries said they receive only a small number of serials. One of them said that consequently, they did not think it was worth the effort to set up serials check-in for their collection and they simply update the holdings record in the ILS. The second library said that they did not think it was worth the effort and they keep a simple sheet that they mark to indicate an issue's arrival. This author can see how a simple system, such as making a check mark on a sheet or updating a holdings record not only makes sense, but can be the best solution for some libraries. Two libraries said they receive a small number of print serials, but do not do check-in in the traditional sense, one of them due to low use. Another said that as a medical library, they get little in print, so they do not check-in or bind. One academic library said, "It was felt that it was unnecessary because we can assume we get the issues we need and so time spent checking them in was wasted time." Another respondent similarly stated:

We realized that we were spending an enormous amount of staff time to avoid a very small number of problems, and once we no longer had staff time to spare, it was better spent following up problems that came to our attention through patron questions.

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Another respondent noted that serials check-in is outsourced. One person noted that all of its titles are online except for leisure titles, which are not checked in.

Question five asks whether libraries that do not do check-in use another process to keep track of their serials. Eight respondents answered the question. Answers varied widely. Two respondents answered that they do not have any alternative process. One respondent said that serials immediately go to shelf and if there is no spot on the shelf, the issue might be an annual or something the library does not keep, and the student takes it to a staff member. That person adds that they do monthly checks for issues needing to be claimed. Another library said their check-in is outsourced. Another library said that they keep issues in boxes, but do not have much space, so some of their serials are online. One library noted that their library keeps a list of the library's serials and has a marc record.

Question six asks all survey respondents whether serials check-in is still as relevant as it once was and if there is the need for change. 61.3% responded that it is still relevant. 20.3% responded in the negative. 18.4% responded that they were not sure. 10.9% of survey respondents skipped this question.

Question seven asks what libraries should do instead of check-in. 81 respondents (or 23.2% of respondents) answered the question. Among the more notable comments include someone who states that the relevancy and necessity of check-in is dependent on the library's mission and circumstances. That person added, "Even where electronic serials constitute the norm, a decision to check in print (or not) must be determined by the role and relative importance of the print themselves rather than the volume of or degree of emphasis on electronic titles." One

Appendix – Copy of Survey Text

To Check in or Not to Check in: A Survey of Librarians on the Relevance of Serials Check-in

This survey is designed to determine the prevalence of libraries that do serials check-in and whether it is relevant in today's world of an increasing presence of electronic journals. Whether you check in on an ILS or a kardex makes no difference. We are simply interested in whether you check in your serials and why or why not.

1. Which option best describes your library type?
 - Academic Library
 - Community College Library
 - Public Library
 - Law Library
 - Research Library
 - Corporate Library
 - Other Library Type
2. Does your library do serials check-in?
 - Yes (*advances to question 3*)
 - No (*advances to question 4*)
3. If your library does serials check-in, what is the purpose?
4. If your library does not do serials check-in, why not?
5. If your library does not do serials check-in, do you use some other process?

Is there a need for change? My research hinges on whether serials check-in is still relevant in today's world where electronic journals are the norm for many libraries. It is reported in the library literature that some libraries have ceased doing check-in of their print serials.
6. Do you feel that serials check-in is still as relevant and necessary as it once was?
 - Yes • No • Not Sure
7. If you answered no to the previous question, what do you think libraries should do instead?

person indicates that academic libraries should treat popular magazines differently than academic serials to be bound. One respondent cites the dangers of losing online access and the consequent need to have print as a backup. However, another person says that libraries should "concentrate staff on functions that are forward-looking and support electronic access," as print serials are rarely used. Another says that libraries should keep brief catalog records, as detailed ones are unnecessary. Someone else states that libraries should shelve their issues and not worry about them. One person notes that check-in's value has diminished, but added that they cannot imagine what will replace it to keep track of print serials that libraries must retain and preserve. A couple of respondents said that their institutions had ceased check-in, which resulted in faculty and library staff being confused about the availability of serials, so the libraries resumed check-in. One respondent noted that libraries should focus on patron service and added that patrons will likely not check on an issue's arrival, so check-in data would be useless to them.

Discussion

The author submits that these survey results say that check-in is not relevant for some libraries and is for others. The reasons are not the same for all libraries in question. For some libraries, serials check-in may be required by legal or institutional auditing purposes, while for others, it may be due to patron preference or the lack of online access. However, if a library is considering ceasing serials check-in, the library should consider the size and organization of the collection, and library service models.²⁴ The library should also consider its mission, determine if the library's constituents value serials check-in data, and create a plan. Questions about collection and usage statistics, budgeting, accreditation, work flows, and training should be addressed. Also, if the library is planning to rely on online access, assessing its reliability and sustainability is important.

Conclusion

It is not news that serials librarianship is changing faster than libraries can keep up and becoming increasingly complicated. The long-time trend of libraries emphasizing ownership of print materials has been gradually shifting towards online access in many libraries since the 1990s with the inception of aggregator databases. Cuts in budget and staff and increasing serials costs have further complicated the issue, making it vital for libraries to do more with less. These factors have caused some libraries to shift around staff assignments and budgets and for some, to make changes that they may not have considered before, in order to cope. "Doing more with less is an everyday practice; examining traditionally unchallenged assumptions is a necessity."²⁵ For some libraries, one change has been to buck print serials check-in, something long considered necessary. This study's data reflects that the necessity and relevance of serials check-in depends on the library, its constituents, and how the library best serves patrons. 🌳

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spring which she is remodeling. And she is looking forward to spending more time with grandkids! Though she will keep her **York College** email, she says it will be better to use this email address — <smcc922@yahoo.com>. Oh! Almost forgot! **Susan** will be at Midwinter in Seattle!

Speaking of babies, just got a great picture of **Dennis the grandfather Brunning's** new granddaughter — **Mia Catherine** — 8.9 pounds! **Mia Catherine** joins big sister **Elianna**. Picture will be in a forthcoming issue.

Tony Ferguson may have retired but not really! He has been riding planes and trains and buses all over the world. But he had time to send us a **Back Talk** that he wrote on a some sort of borrowed device and he even wrote about publishers and buses, this issue, p.86.

And — listen up!! Do any of you want to conduct your own interview of someone in a library, a publisher, or an aggregator or whatever? **Against the Grain** would love it! Please write me and tell me who you would like to interview! Or, if you want to suggest that we interview someone ourselves, we are listening! Send an email to either me <kstrauch@comcast.net> or **Tom Gilson** <gilson@cofc.edu>!! 🌳