Libraries, Journals and Publishers

The library of the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) was the centre-piece of the institution, when I began to frequent it in the mid-1970s. The shelves were full of treasures; it was a time when books seemed out of reach of academic salaries. The weekly arrival of Current Contents, much sought after by those interested in the contents pages of journals that were unavailable or issues that would appear by surface mail months after publication, was always eagerly anticipated. There was a special pleasure in ‘feeling’ newly arrived journals. A sense of tranquility prevailed in the large building, attracting readers to spend a lazy afternoon, browsing. The extensive collection of back volumes, including journals printed in the 19th century, provided a resource that few researchers, old or young, could afford to ignore. The journal collections grew in size and cost throughout the last two decades of the 20th century. This was the period when private publishers became the principal drivers of an explosion in the number of science journals, whose appearance and quality seemed to place traditional journals at a disadvantage. Staid professional societies began to change their style, often compelled to start new, specialized journals to cope with competition. A perceptible transformation was evident in the new century. The digital age had arrived and journals were suddenly ‘electronic’. As the campus network expanded, journal access no longer required the pleasant and leisurely walk to the library, often accompanied by diversions to the campus coffee house. Journals which sometimes arrived months after the date of publication were now instantly available on computer screens. A new generation of students (and faculty) now emerged, scarcely attracted by the ‘feel’ of a newly minted journal. The joy of savouring the illustration on the cover and the pleasure of turning the pages randomly, has been replaced by efficient and purposeful searches of collections of accepted articles in advance of print publication. ‘Links’ allow readers to instantly access cited references. The task of striding around the library, from stack to stack, is now a rapidly fading memory. The digitization of books and the rapid development of portable reading devices, with extraordinary storage capacities, may even pose a threat to the traditional task of librarians; the acquisition, cataloguing, lending and retrieval of books. Will the traditional library eventually become extinct? What will the ‘librarians’ of the future do?

An interesting phenomenon over the past decade in India is the metamorphosis of librarians into ‘information scientists’. The name appears to signify a perception of a new role, as a handler of information in an organization. In the early days of the Internet many databases were not available online; local data centres needed to be created, maintained and updated. The dramatic upsurge in the use of technology in handling information requires skills which the traditional librarian hardly needed. Unfortunately, the scholarship associated with the librarians of yesteryear, their understanding of the reading preferences of their clientele and a genuine love for books and journals has seemingly evaporated. Digitization and electronic archiving has made many sections of our libraries redundant. Binderies, where one often had to go to retrieve a badly needed journal for quick reference, are almost extinct. The dusty smell of old journals is hard to recall. Librarians in India seem to be reinventing themselves; donning the role of analysts of science, dabbling in the arena of scientometrics. This is not an easy, or even desirable transformation with many ‘information scientists’ often being ill equipped to deal with the new, ever changing and, invariably, controversial metrics of science.

Libraries (and librarians) today need to confront new and sometimes difficult issues associated with journal acquisition. The costs of science journals have been rising steeply over the last decade, even while the number of journals has proliferated. Journal pricing has been strongly influenced by the growth of monopolies in the publishing industry. Journals in the area of science, technology, engineering and medicine (STEM) are being taken over by a handful of commercial publishing houses. Even professional societies and academies have found it difficult to maintain independent production, dissemination and pricing policies. The transition to electronic publishing has provided commercial publishers an excellent opportunity to minimize production costs, maximize journal numbers in their stables and to promote ‘bundling’ strategies, where librarians purchase electronic access to large numbers of journals, bundled into a single package. The issues of ‘perpetual access’ and ‘electronic backfiles’ are important in considering library budgeting today. Two publishing houses, Elsevier and Springer-Verlag, together account for the most significant share of the library budget for science journals. In an effort to
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meet the need for journal access and to combat the problem of rising costs, government agencies have put together consortia of public institutions, which are charged with the collective responsibility of negotiating with monopoly publishers, for electronic access to journals. The multiplicity of consortia and diversity of participating institutions in India has resulted in wide variations in pricing for individual libraries. The days when journals had fixed prices for library subscriptions may be receding into the past. Publishing cartels control the arena of science journals in a fashion that does not lend itself to fair and reasonable pricing policies. The boom in institutes of science and technology in India has resulted in an unexpected windfall for publishing cartels, as they set prices for ‘bundles’ which may rarely be used and whose cost will inevitably rise in later years. With institutions increasingly preferring electronic access and dispensing with print subscriptions, new libraries may inevitably acquire a new form. The days of the large, solemn reading rooms, which even seemed to frown on whispering, are clearly numbered.

Journal costs have rarely been discussed in India. The government has promoted measures to enhance access to science journals by centrally supporting consortia, which have been ill prepared to address the issue of overpricing. The unreasonableness of many publishers has, however, been a matter of concern in Western institutions for many years. Over twenty years ago, Philip Abelson noted that librarians in the United States had ‘few allies’ and ‘were not well organized’ to fight mounting journal costs in the early days of the rise of publishing monopolies. He added that at the time of writing ‘librarians are now more effectively united and are finding allies among scientists and chancellors of universities. Perhaps most important they have identified major contributors to their financial problems – the international commercial publishers’. Abelson went on to point out that ‘another factor influencing a revolt against monopolistic pricing is growing recognition that some high-priced journals have little impact’ (Science, 1989, 244, 1125). An early study of the ‘cost effectiveness’ of physics journals revealed that ‘the group of journals published by the American Physical Society had on average a “cost effectiveness” more than 12 times that of the best group averages for any of several major publishing houses’ (Barschall, H. H., Phys. Today, 1988, 41, 56). Two decades later the publishing monopolies have grown, consolidated and have begun hunting for new markets in countries like India and China, where a rapid expansion of the research enterprise is underway. Library economics has also been the focus of more elaborate studies including issues of violation of American anti-trust laws. An analysis of ‘journal pricing and mergers’ suggests that ‘the prospect of bundling and price discrimination, of course, will inevitably raise anti-trust issues (McCabe, M. J., Am. Econ. Rev., 2002, 92, 259). Interestingly, it is precisely the same issues of ‘bundling and price discrimination’ that might be of concern to those charged with making decisions on acquisitions for the various library consortia in India. It is clear that a more organized, collective approach by institutions is needed to ensure that unreasonable subscription rates are not paid to commercial publishers.

The authors in science journals are scientists, so are the readers. The processes of editing and peer review are also managed by academics, who are almost never paid for their efforts. This is community service and works very well in journals managed by societies and academies. Commercial publishers add value to journals by many marketing strategies including concerted efforts to raise impact factors by purposefully recruiting influential and visible scientists to their cause. In the world of electronic publishing many costs associated with traditional print journals have been replaced with other issues. Authors and journals no longer pay large postal costs for transporting manuscripts across the world. As print volumes decline, paper and printing costs will diminish. Online submissions, using formatted templates, reduce the routine work of editorial staff, permitting journals to cut salary costs. The large price differentials (and of course impact differences) between groups of commercial journals and those produced by bodies of scientists suggest that another hard look at monopoly pricing by large publishers is required, especially in a country like India where many new ‘libraries’ are likely to be created. There have been several instances where ‘rebel journals’ have emerged as an answer to excessive overpricing. A report in Nature (Declan Butler, www.nature.com/news/2007/070122) notes that most rebel journals produced with community support quickly achieve ‘scholarly success’ but ‘often get poor support from libraries’. Enhancing subscription levels requires a marketing muscle which is hard to achieve for small enterprises. Unsurprisingly, many large and successful scientific societies, with substantial portfolios of journals, have now begun to acquire some of the characteristics of commercial publishers and at times have even entered into collaborative agreements in order to enhance the reach of their journals. In composing this column in my mind, I asked a colleague how many journals did he read on a regular basis. His answer was revealing. He thought about the question for a while and then ruefully remarked: ‘Nowadays, I only seem to read papers online and almost never browse through the journal’. The march of the Internet, online collections and public databases may alter the face of publishing. The scientific journal as a carefully chosen aggregate of papers, appearing with a predictable periodicity, may give way to a continuously expanding electronic archive. When that happens, the libraries and journals of the past will only be memories. Commercial publishers will, however, sense new opportunities and challenges.

P. Balaram