

# The Nature of Journals of Librarianship: A Review

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In the course of researching citation patterns, author affiliation, and research content of Australian journals of librarianship through the application of bibliometric research methods, broader issues relevant to the research topic were examined. Although written with a particular purpose in mind, the following review stands alone as a discussion of the nature of journals of librarianship and aspects of the literature which should be the subject of concern to all members of the discipline.

With the exception of a few articles about the development of the *Australian Library Journal*, written by former editors, there has been very little published which either describes or analyses the journals produced in Australia for librarianship. A very different picture emerges when the literature published in the United Kingdom and the United States is reviewed. Numerous discussion and research articles have been written, as early as 1942, which examine the literature of librarianship. Much of this review is based upon these impressions, findings and often unflattering statements in order to achieve some understanding of the role of library literature in the discipline. In particular, the issues addressed are the number of publications, their content and purpose, and editorial policies.

The function journals serve as a channel for communicating research is significant and recognised by Feehan et al. (1987:174) as central to the growth of a discipline. It is a method of communication used by the sciences since the first issue of the *Journal des savans* in the 17th century (Osburn, 1984:316). Guttsman (1966:189) characterises journals of the social sciences as 'important not only as collections of research papers but also as reviewing organs and as disseminators of factual information. Garvey and Griffith (1980:47) looked at the role of scientific communication in research and knowledge creation saying:

The most crucial point of dissemination of scientific information is the transfer of information from the informal to the formal domain, which occurs with the journal publication of the article.

Goldhor's (1972:2) 'requirement' for librarianship to attain the status of a science includes the process of research, peer review, publication, analysis and iteration of research, publication, and so on.

On the basis of the above statements it could be argued a profession's literature which does not display the features discussed is failing to build a body of knowledge on which development of the discipline can proceed. Further, the status of the profession's intellectual base, the degree of scholarship, must be regarded with some suspicion.

Whilst this may seem a harsh judgement, it is one which has received attention from researchers and reviewers

of the literature of library and information science. Concerns about the extent and level of complexity of research in the field has been the justification for a number of studies, including those by Enger, Quirk and Stewart (1988), Feehan (1987), and Peritz (1980). Wallace (1985:403) notes the trend from discussions relating to whether librarianship should adopt the methods of the sciences 'to conjecture as to why more research is not done'. The amount of research, as communicated in journals of librarianship, is a frequent criticism of the literature produced for and by the profession. Interrelated factors are the quality of published papers in general and the large number of journals in print, aspects of the literature which, Moon (Danton, 1976:155) and Rayward (1990:132) argue, are not independent of each other.

The nature of librarianship literature may also be examined in terms of its scholarliness. This requires a definition to be established for 'scholarly'. Price (1970) looked at a range of measures to describe the differences between hard and soft sciences, including the number of references a paper listed. Whilst the extent of referencing is not presented as an unchallengeable indicator of a paper's scholarliness, Price (1970:7) says 'it is reasonable to identify the amount of such footnotage and referencing with our intuitive idea of 'scholarliness''. In their study, Windsor and Windsor (1973:380) define a scholarly paper as one with references, those which do not list references are classed as nonscholarly.

Peritz (1981:62), applied Price's (1970) measure in her study of library science research papers and found they 'tend to be less 'scholarly' than those in other fields of the social sciences'. Another citation study by Foster (1968:147) notes some of the journals examined did not have 'scholarly characteristics'. What then does characterise journals of librarianship?

An early description of library publications, by Beals in 1942, is recalled by Johnson (1982:132) and Maguire (1988:321) as 'glad tidings, testimony, and research', with too little of the last. In 1961, Blake (1961:715) opened her article with this searing attack:

Most professional library literature is just about as arid as it is voluminous.  
Articles pour out in a steady flow and much of this spate of verbiage is pompous,  
petty, prissy and polysyllabic.

Danton (1976:155) reports Carnovsky's description of library literature as 'dull, repetitious, and worthless', and similar criticisms are remembered by a former editor of the *Australian Library Journal* (Bryan, 1972:233). While the above tend to use emotive prose and are found in reviews and discussion articles, a number of studies have found the same disturbing trends in the literature of librarianship.

Foster (1968:147) examined five library journals concluding their content was 'primarily 'how we did it in our library' articles and comprehensive state-of-the-art surveys'. A year's issues of fifteen journals were studied by Westerling (Danton, 1976:170) in which she found '61 'philosophically oriented articles' and 398 articles with a 'practical or situational orientation'. Concluding his discussion, Danton writes:

The frontiers of the profession will not be advanced, its fundamental problems will not be solved, and the many 'whys' which it faces will not be answered by 'how-we-do-it-good-in-our- library' articles, no matter how numerous, useful, informative and well done (1976:170).

In an attempt to explain the finding that 'an inordinate proportion of the literature consisted of news-type articles', Saracevic and Perk (1973:133) suggest this feature 'may be a reflection on the subject as being action oriented, with creation of knowledge and education as a secondary activity'. Their sample was taken from articles indexed in *Library Literature*, however, the authors are reluctant to correlate their results with indexing policy and put the view that journals in other disciplines do not have the same number of news articles as are published in library and information science journals.

The nature of librarianship and scholarship in the profession is a point Rayward (1990:131) also discusses. He describes librarianship as 'complex, multi-faceted, [and] rather fragmented' which differs from other fields because 'there is not the same notion of a research-front or cutting edge'. It is unclear if Rayward uses the term 'research-front' in the same sense as Price (1965:515) who applies the words 'research front' to explain his finding that scientific literature evidenced high frequencies of citations to the most recent publications, creating a closely bound network of papers.

Whilst the nature of the profession may affect journal content, there are other factors which also deserve consideration here. Firstly, as Danton (1976:158) notes 'journals have substantially differing objectives and readerships which go far to determine contents, approach and, indeed, the whole 'atmosphere' of the journal'. Related to this is whether a journal uses external reviewers to assess and accept or reject contributions, and the perception that a refereed journal is more scholarly. Certainly Boyce and Wallace (1987:654) believe 'articles in refereed publications are given more weight than those in unrefereed publications'. Possibly a more serious issue is the number of journals published in the field of librarianship and the impact this may have on editorial decisions. For example, an editor struggling to fill an issue may be tempted to accept articles of poor quality. Finally, the qualifications of editors, particularly of association journals, have been questioned.

In his review, Danton (1976) classes the journals in the field geographically and by topic. The categories he identifies are:

'National general-interest journals' - in the United States the *Library Journal* is an obvious example;

'State publications' - which are produced by a state library, association, or agency;

'National special-interest journals' - these may be about types of libraries, an activity carried out in libraries, eg cataloguing, or a topic of interest to the profession, eg education; and

'Journals of other than state libraries' - most of which are published by 'privately supported institutions' (171).

Journals of each category will have different purposes and objectives, and within a category there also will be variations. This review is concerned primarily with journals belonging to both 'National' categories and the last category.

### **Australian Journals of Library and Information Science**

The founder of *Australian Academic and Research Libraries (AARL)*, Dietrich H. Borchardt, compiled a list of 'objectives' which he believes journals published by professional associations should meet. They are:

- (1) Communicating with members
- (2) Inviting professional debate on professional matters
- (3) Protecting professional practices and practitioners
- (4) Publicising the profession's role
- (5) Advancing professional competence (Borchardt, 1989:224).

Research and scholarliness, although not explicitly expressed, are elements of all but the third and fourth points. However, these aspects of librarianship are skirted around by Borchardt (1989:221), who uses the terms 'intellectual and professional' when discussing his concerns for journal content.

Michael Talbot (1992:1), the then editor of the *Australian Library Journal (ALJ)*, is plainer in his language. He agrees with a former editor 'that the *ALJ* is not a scholarly journal' but rather 'a balance of lighter pieces set against genuine scholarly work', however, 'publishing original research is a primary function of the *Journal*'.

The only other Australian journal discussed in the literature is *Australian Special Libraries (ASL)*, edited by John Thawley for a number of years. *ASL* is regarded by Thawley as 'a vehicle for communicating new ideas and developments as they relate to Australian special librarians' (1990:3).

Of the eight Australian journals, *AARL*, *ALJ*, *Australasian Public Libraries and Information Services*, *ASL*, *Cataloguing Australia*, *Education for Libraries and Information Services: Australia (ELISA)*, *LASIE Bulletin*

and *Orana*, considered for this study, only *AARL* states that 'all substantial articles are refereed'. The *ALJ* and *Orana* state their articles are 'reviewed', but whether this is used as an alternate term or there is a difference in the process of article evaluation is not known.

Editors play an important role in journal publishing. Their editorial style, knowledge of the field, and perception of their journal's image will influence content and contributions. According to Johnson (1982:131) many journals rely on voluntary work, with only a small number employing full-time editors. The author also notes a 'considerable turnover among editorial staffs'.

Borchardt (1989:223), reports similar conditions apply to association journals of librarianship in Australia. While the dedication and enthusiasm of members is acknowledged, he goes on to say the enthusiasm is often short-lived and 'dedication and self sacrifice are not substitutes for professionalism'. As an advocate of employing professional editors and considering commercial publishers, Borchardt's (1989:221) argument is supported by his finding that no editors of Australian journals of librarianship are 'editors *by profession*'. There has been no change in these circumstances since Borchardt's article was published.

So far this discussion has focused on the content of journals of librarianship in the context of characteristics of the profession and its publications, and the purpose of different journals as channels of professional communication. Another factor, as mentioned above, is the effect the number of journals published has on the content of those journals.

A plea found in editorials and noted elsewhere is the call for copy to fill issues and meet publishing deadlines. Bryan (1972:233) recalls 'trying to cajole, threaten and shame members into contributing' to the *ALJ*, and Jean Whyte (1972) admits she published all contributions for much of the period she was editor of the *Journal*. Conditions for editors of the *ALJ* appear to have improved, judging by Talbot's editorial of February 1992 in which he says 'the intake, in terms of quantity, is about right'. Not so for the new editors of *ASL* in 1992, who, endeavouring to establish a list of contributors to the journal, ask members to 'please volunteer!' A less desperate sounding editor (Beattie, 1992:3) of *ELISA* asks readers to 'encourage your colleagues to subscribe' and contribute to the journal.

The question here is whether some of these statements are an indicator of the journals' difficulty attracting contributions due to the number of librarianship journals being published. It would appear there is a general perception this is the case. Maguire (1988:318) consulted *Ulrich's* to reach the figure of almost 900 periodicals dedicated to library and information science topics. This does not include 'annuals and irregular serials'.

Subscription numbers are also discussed by Maguire (1988:319) estimating that a large proportion of these journals 'struggle to maintain 400 subscribers'. While these figures do not reflect exposure of a journal, a low circulation rate may give some indication of the level of interest in a journal, and therefore potential contributors. Circulation rates, as reported by *Ulrich's*, were examined for the journals subject of this review. *Cataloguing Australia* did not list circulation, *ELISA* and *LASIE* had circulation rates of 400 or less, and the other five journals were noted as having a 900 or greater circulation rate.

Although Maguire (1988:323) warns us to be mindful of the quality of journals, she does not offer a direct criticism of library periodical literature. Borchardt (1989:221) treads softly in this respect also, saying the 'ca. 50 serials' in Australia is 'a relatively high number for the profession'. Moon's more forthright statement, as quoted by Danton (1976:155), declares 'the deadliest disease afflicting the library press is proliferation', noting the number of publications 'spreads too thinly the limited amount of good material'. At the end of his review, despite his conclusion that 'a great deal of progress' has been made, Danton (1976:174) notes 'there is ... still too much duplication in our periodical literature, and the number of titles is probably greater than we need'. More recently, Michaels (1993:297) lists one of the four factors contributing to the 'sorry state' of research in the field as 'too many library journals'.

## Conclusion

The views expressed above do suggest an over supply of journals in the profession, however, a study is yet to be conducted into the impact the number of journals have on the quality of their content.

Whilst this is not an exhaustive review there would appear to be a number of common factors which characterise

or influence the nature of the literature of librarianship. Levels of scholarliness and research are low when compared to some other disciplines. This may be a reflection of the nature of the profession, which consequently influences the stated objectives of journals of librarianship. Authors have commented on the large number of journals published for librarianship which could affect the quality of articles published in journals struggling to attract contributions. In Australia, peer review in the discipline is lacking as refereed journals are the exception rather than the rule and the qualification for editorship is willingness to do the job rather than any formal training in the field.

It would be foolish to suppose that yet another article discussing these issues will alter a situation which has concerned writers in the library and information science discipline for many years. However, there is the possibility that this review will act as a spark in a mind new to the discipline or draw forth research ideas idling in the minds of those with longer tenure. At worst the discussion will serve as a reminder that librarianship as an academic discipline deserves better of its members.

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