Continuities

The Serialization of (Just About) Everything

By Steve Kelley

Recently, as part of a profile in the newsletter of the organization for serials specialists NASIG (full disclosure: as of this writing, I am the current President of NASIG), I was asked what changes I see for serialists over the next five years. After giving it a good deal of thought, I said that I thought that we will see more library resources that are not traditionally defined as serials becoming more like serials in important respects. Furthermore, I added that I believe that over the next five years, serials specialists will be brought in more and more to assist in figuring out how to manage these increasingly serial-like (serialized?) resources, because serials specialists understand how to manage the acquisition of resources that are paid for by subscription and also understand how to describe resources that change and add content over time, as do serials. I thought that I would expand on this idea for this “Continuities” column.

The History, Or When Serials Were Serials and Monographs Were Monographs

One does not have to go very far back in the past (say, twenty or so years) to remember a time when serials were serials and monographs were monographs and ne’er (or at least, rarely) the twain shall meet. Yes, there were the occasional exceptions. Monographic series, while obviously being primarily monographs, also have a number of serial-like features. Series have a title that runs across multiple parts, they usually have numbered volumes, and they are often acquired by libraries on standing orders, just like a variety of serial publications, such as directories and yearbooks.

Another long-standing type of library material that has shared monographic and serial features is the category of loose-leaf publications. These publications, which are usually made available to the public in three-ring binders, contain material that is frequently updated (very
often sets of laws or rules that are revised with some regularity). Libraries purchase subscriptions to the loose-leaf updates, and the material is interfiled in the binders, replacing pages where the material is now outdated. The subscription component to acquiring loose-leaf updating materials is a definite serial-like feature, but the initial material has always tended to be purchased as a one-time monograph. Loose-leaf publications used to present unique problems for the bibliographic description of these materials. Before the advent of the continuing resources format which takes the special features of loose-leaf publications into account, these publications were stuck in limbo, neither fish nor fowl. Some libraries cataloged them as monographs, others cataloged them as serials, and neither bibliographic approach fully described the unique features of loose-leaf publications.

Of course there were several other troublesome categories of materials that blurred the lines between the monographic world and the serial world, such as serial supplemental materials (especially things like CD-ROMs) and both print and microform reprintings of journals, magazines, and newspapers, but the two major categories of overlap between monographs and serials were monographic series and loose-leaf updating publications. Outside of these few trouble spots, twenty years ago monographs were monographs (each work was published, described and purchased separately), and serials were serials (each work was published in parts over time, described as having multiple parts, and was generally purchased through a subscription). That all changed with the emergence and explosive growth of internet-based resources.

**The Increasingly Serials-Like Nature of the Acquisition of Monographic Materials**

The development of electronic bibliographic materials available through the World Wide Web has lead to changes both great and small in the processes libraries use to acquire and
describe a wide variety of resources that, in older models, would have been rather straightforward monographic resources. The processes used to acquire and describe these relatively new internet-based bibliographic resources have significant features that are similar to the processes used to acquire and describe serials. I will begin my discussion of the ways in which monographs have become “serialized” by examining some of the changes to acquisitions processes brought about by the development of electronic resources.

One of the major changes to the acquisition processes used for monographic resources that makes these processes similar to those used for serials is undoubtedly the licensing of electronic resources. In the 1990’s, with the emergence of electronic journals, serials specialists started working to become familiar with the legal niceties and problems surrounding publisher licensing agreements. These publisher licensing agreements were (and remain) necessary to define the terms under which libraries can purchase access to electronic serial resources. Fifteen to twenty years ago, many serials librarians had to quickly educate themselves in the basics of contract law in order to be able to provide access to electronic journals to their patrons. More recently, the explosion of electronic book packages and the development of streaming video plans, both of which rely on publisher content licensing to regulate access to these materials, has brought licensing concerns front and center for many, if not most, monographic acquisitions librarians. The problems and issues related to content licensing that were formerly the nearly exclusive province of serials specialists have spread to the monographs realm.

In addition to the licensing of access to electronic monographic materials being similar to processes used in acquiring serials, the phenomenon of paying for access to electronic materials repeatedly over multiple years parallels the long-standing practice of subscribing to serials. Of course electronic databases have been purchased by libraries through subscriptions for a number
of years, but this is still only a relatively brief period when one considers how long print serials have been purchased through subscriptions. In addition to electronic databases, a wide variety of electronic resources have, in recent years, become available to libraries through licensed packages that are paid for annually. These resources include text electronic monographs, electronic audio books and streaming video. As they have to be paid for on an annual recurring basis, they are materials purchased on subscriptions, and serials librarians have been dealing with the quirks of subscriptions for many, many years.

The development of the demand-driven (also known as patron-driven) access model for electronic monographs, presents some interesting features in the “serialization” of electronic monograph acquisitions. In a DDA access situation, a library pays an annual fee to a publisher and is sent a batch of bibliographic records for electronic monographic resources, which include URLs linking to the sources themselves. The library loads these bibliographic records into their local catalog, and each time the patron accesses one of these electronic monographs, the library is charged a rental fee. After so many uses (often no more than five) of a particular electronic monograph, the library will purchase it permanently. So, the DDA monographic acquisitions model is blend of subscription, rent-by-use and permanent purchase.

The Increasingly Serials-Like Nature of the Cataloging of Monographic Materials

Not only have the acquisitions processes used to purchase access to electronic monographic resources become increasingly similar to the processes used to purchase serials, so too have the cataloging practices used to manage the discovery of electronic monographic resources become increasingly similar to the practices used in the cataloging of serials. I will discuss three aspects of this trend: the batch loading of bibliographic records, the ongoing editing
and maintenance of bibliographic records, and wrestling with the question of using a single record or separate record approach in cataloging electronic resources.

The practice of batch loading bibliographic records into local catalogs has been around for quite a while, and has been used for formats other than serials. Many libraries have batch loaded catalog records for microform materials and government documents for years. However, I would argue that ten to fifteen years ago, it became very common for libraries to maintain their collections of electronic serial resources through batch loaded records purchased from commercial services. The bibliographic records for these electronic serial resources needed fairly regular updating and editing and were simply tinkered with more often than the batch loaded records for other types of materials. I think that this model of more frequently updating batch loads characterizes the bibliographic practices used to provide discoverability and access to electronic monograph resources. The rapid proliferation of packages of electronic resources (text monographs, audio monographs, streaming video, etc.) has greatly increased the frequency of bulk loading of bibliographic records.

Another aspect of monographic cataloging that has become more like the cataloging of serial resources is the increased instability and impermanence of the bibliographic records for electronic monographs. Before there were electronic books, the cataloging of monographic resources was fairly stable. The bibliographic record for a given monograph was not likely to be edited much or at all. On the other hand, serials cataloging has always been a matter of trying to hit a moving target. With serials, any number of features, including the publisher, the frequency of publication, and the very title can change. Serials catalogers are well acquainted with frequently editing “their” records. Now, with electronic resources, some of that instability has made its way into the cataloging of monographs. The URLs and URIs used to link to resources,
as well as other access information for electronic monographs can change over time, and the bibliographic records for these resources need to be edited to remain current and useful. The problem of trying to hit a moving bibliographic target is no longer exclusively (or just about) the concern of serials catalogers.

One final serials cataloging concern that has entered into the realm of monographs cataloging is the issue of trying to decide between having a single bibliographic record or separate records for the print and electronic versions of a resource. The question is whether to use the record for a print version of a resource and add the URL for the electronic version, or whether to use two separate bibliographic records, one describing the print version and one describing the electronic version. Serials catalogers have been wrestling with this issue since the emergence of electronic journals. Generally speaking, public services librarians have been more likely to prefer the single record approach, arguing that it makes it easier for patrons to interpret the public catalog display. As a serials cataloger, I have generally preferred the separate record approach, because I believe that we are actually describing two different, albeit related, resources. With the development of batch loading and batch updating services for electronic serials, many libraries that once preferred the single record approach (such as my own institution) moved to a separate record approach, because having separate records in the local catalog makes it easier to edit and/or remove the records for electronic serials as these resources change or are no longer part of a particular purchasing bundle. As more libraries are purchasing electronic books, they are having to decide on this same issue of whether to merely add a URL to the record for a print version, or to add a separate bibliographic record. And again, the implications of bulk loading argue for the separate record approach over the single record approach.

Conclusion
Perhaps my title has overstated the case somewhat. It might not be that *everything* has become more serial-like, but there are certainly more formats of material that are being managed in ways that are familiar to serials librarians. The rapid proliferation of licensed materials as well as materials purchased through subscriptions indicate a certain serialization (if you will) of non-serial materials. The issues related to the bulk-loading and increased data maintenance and editing that the bibliographic records of more and more types of non-serial materials require also make these materials more like serials in important aspects of their management. I see no reason why this trend would decrease over the coming years, in fact, I fully expect it to grow. If that is the case, I expect to see serials management skills become increasingly important within libraries.