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Decision Making In Libraries Acquisitions - - Indexes Or Journals?

The director of a well known university library, when asked why he had not subscribed to the *Science Citation Index*, answered as follows. "I think the *SCI* is a fine retrieval tool. But I asked the faculty members - - which would you prefer, the *SCI* or 40 new journal subscriptions? We have a finite budget and choices must be made." In reply to this seemingly reasonable approach, I asked, "Which 40 journals?" He seemed puzzled by this seeming non sequitur.

If his library had just been planned and had no current journal subscription list, it might be more difficult to justify the purchase of the *SCI* even though I could cite numerous examples where the *SCI* was purchased by small or other institutions precisely *because* they had small journal collections or used other sources for the journal articles identified in *SCI* and other indexes.

However, my colleague is director of a leading university library which already subscribes to over 3,000 periodicals including several hundred in chemistry and ancillary topics. I mention the field of chemistry because it has been shown that over 90% of the significant literature of chemistry appears in *less* than 100 journals of which many are multi-disciplinary journals.

Even if the 40 new journals to be selected were of equal size, which is quite unlikely, the library would only increase its total information content by an insignificant percentage of interest to a small per cent of the faculty. By contrast, *SCI* will provide access to information from at least 300,000 current source articles per year and bibliographic information on several million cited books and journal articles. In addition, the *SCI* will be useful to a much larger percentage of the faculty and student body. The average journal article represents a considerable investment of human energy. However, it remains potential energy and essentially useless unless retrieval mechanisms are provided.

In most universities and colleges with several thousand students and faculty members, the *SCI* may be used several thousand times per year. On the other hand, studies have shown that the average journal article in chemistry is read by about 15 chemists in toto! If the library decides to buy 40 new journals, the probability is still high that readers may ask for material in the thousands of other periodicals to which the library does not yet subscribe. If you have carefully selected the first 3,000 then there will not be a significant difference in the average readership of the next 3,000.

The topic of journal selection and evaluation will be the main theme of a future editorial. It is almost ironical and of some interest to librarians and scientists that probably no other information system can be as useful as the *SCI* in determining which should be the next 40 journals to buy.