

Current Comments®

Help! What Would You Do with Three Million Journals?

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Many years ago, a scientist friend told me that his wife had delivered him an ultimatum. Either he discard 30 years' accumulation of journals, or she would file for divorce. Eventually, he donated the journals to a library and even managed to get a nice income tax deduction for his philanthropy.

Almost everyone harbors the hoarding instinct to some extent. Scientists store thousands of reprints that they collect over the years. These include their own papers and many more they have received from colleagues. Oftentimes, these vast collections of reprints are donated to libraries, but what can they do with them? Most libraries are already overcrowded, and certainly can't afford to catalog individual reprints.

At ISI®, we too have a vast collection of old books and journals. We have not discarded most of the millions of publications we have indexed over the past 13 years. They fill a warehouse that is bulging at the seams. Aggravating the problem is the unfortunate fact that this material is not sorted by journal title. Theoretically, it is simple to select a particular issue for retrieval by using OATS® (*Original Article Text Service*) numbers, but as will be explained later, even this requires considerable effort if the issue is buried in the stacks.

To understand how this situation has come about, it is necessary to explain just how we store journals at ISI. As

each periodical arrives at our headquarters in Philadelphia, it is assigned an accession or serial number that is unique to that particular *issue*. These accession numbers, incidentally, are the numerals which appear in the oval beside each journal's title in *Current Contents*® (*CC*®).

After they are processed, the journals are shelved by accession number for OATS, ISI's document delivery service.¹ It is important to note that individual issues of any given journal are not stored consecutively. The May 1983 issue of *American Film*, for instance, may be found next to the June 1983 issue of the *Australian Journal of Dairy Technology*, which in turn may be shelved beside the Spring 1983 issue of *Rural Sociology*. In short, the shelf arrangement is in sequence according to the order in which the journals are received. However, it should be noted that we do have a title index to these shelf locations. So the current collection, shelved as is, can be used very efficiently to retrieve individual article requests for OATS. Since we will fill orders for articles that are five years old, journals are kept in serial number order at ISI headquarters for several years. They are then transferred to our warehouse for storage.

Fully 10,000 square feet of floor space in our warehouse is required to store the more than three million journal issues and several hundred thousand books.

But the economics of storage and retrieval for sale of articles from this collection results in a price beyond the market's willingness to pay. The journals are boxed in cardboard cartons which are identified by accession number. The books, more often than not, are mixed in the same cartons as journals. Each carton, fully loaded with books and journals, weighs approximately 40 pounds. They are stacked as high as six feet on wooden platforms, or skids. Each skid contains as many as three dozen cartons—almost 1,500 pounds. Hundreds of skids stretch from one wall of the building to the other. Thus, a total of approximately one million pounds of printed material—or 500 tons—is using up costly space in our warehouse.

This printed matter is almost impossible to characterize briefly. Virtually every publication that has ever been indexed in either *Science Citation Index*® (*SCI*®), *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (*SSCI*®), *Arts & Humanities Citation Index*™ (*A&HCI*™), or *CC* is included in this assemblage. Nearly all of the publications are from the 1970s, reflecting the growth of ISI's data base during that decade. There are also numerous items from the 1960s and even from the mid-1950s. We only recently completed work on an *SCI* cumulation covering 1955 to 1964.²

A stroll through the looming stacks of old journals may foster a certain sense of wonder or nostalgia, but it can also serve to drive home the point that we can no longer continue to store these old books and journals. Our collection resembles nothing so much as the treasure on a sunken Spanish galleon—an inaccessible store of wealth that is simply not economically feasible to salvage. The publications are stored in such a physically monolithic fashion that it is costly to locate a given series of accession num-

bers. And even if the carton containing a desired journal issue were located, to reach the carton now, without using more space, might involve moving tons of material out of the way.

We are loath to discard or destroy the wealth of knowledge represented by these old publications. But the collection has become unwieldy. Furthermore, we have been informed that we must move some of the material if we are to meet fire safety regulations. But to move part means we must move all, since there is no simple or expedient way to selectively move them—as, for example, all issues from 1970.

Since we operate a document delivery service, it is fair to ask why we don't use these journals to form a comprehensive library of printed materials upon which to draw. Aside from the time and expense required to sort and shelve these publications, the plain truth is that, contrary to popular belief, we simply don't receive enough orders for old articles to justify the cost of maintaining a library. That's why these journals were removed from our stacks and placed in storage in the first place. As a matter of fact, it is a luxury we really can't justify, considering the concentration of *OATS* requests for articles from only the past few years.

Another suggestion involved using the collection to get a tax write-off by donating it to a library or some other institution that could make use of it. However, we have already written off the value of these books and journals as a business expense. We cannot *also* deduct their residual value as a charitable contribution. This is quite different than the case of my friend, who could claim his journals as a deduction. And if ISI donates these journals to some institution, that institution must be able and willing to pay the costs of shipping and sorting the material, or reconstituting it in accession num-

ber order as it is. In fact, they too could provide a service like *OATS*.

While it is not the custom to look a gift horse in the mouth, one can understand an institution's reluctance to buy a pig in a poke. Those of you familiar with the US Book Exchange may wonder why they don't accept our gift. But they are not in a position to accept the burden of transporting and sorting the material. Undoubtedly we could sell or more easily give these journals away if they were sorted alphabetically. But that's the rub. We simply can't justify the time and expense of such an operation.

In case you are wondering if we offered the journals to friends in China or other developing countries, the answer is yes. But even in China, someone has to take the responsibility for "marking and parking" three million journals, not to mention the logistics of organizing the transportation by ship.

Once we do get rid of that warehouse full of old journals, then we will still face the problem of what to do with each new

year's accumulation. Maybe then we'll have enough space to sort the material selectively if someone expresses an interest in it.

We continue to hope for some solution to this problem. Even as this essay goes to press, I am in touch with colleagues overseas who could use the material, but need time to organize the financing and logistics. We also hope to work out a continuing relationship with some organization capable of operating the equivalent of a national periodicals service.

It seems a tragic waste to simply dump our "Spanish treasure" in a landfill. Yet that may be our only option, unless someone provides an alternative solution. If you have any ideas as to what we can do with our journals, please write to Robert Steck, Director of Fulfillment Services, ISI, 3501 Market Street, University City Science Center, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104, USA, or call (800) 523-1850, extension 1352. Telex: 84-5305.

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REFERENCES

1. Garfield E. While you're up, dial me an *OATS*—we're still waiting for the document delivery revolution. *Current Contents* (50):5-10, 13 December 1982.
2. The 1955-1964 *Science Citation Index* cumulation—a major new bibliographic tool for historians of science and all others who need precise information retrieval for the age of space and molecular biology. *Current Contents* (5):5-8, 31 January 1983.