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Why Not a Shared Database for Legal Serial Patterns?*

Georgia K. Briscoe**

Just as bibliographic records are shared by law libraries through a national database, serial publication pattern data could also be shared. The author presents a history of the movement toward such a database and offers a specific proposal for its creation.

Every law library automating its serials department must go through a long, laborious process to create computer check-in records for each serial subscription. The process requires first gathering, and then inputting, information that accurately describes the serial's "publication pattern." This pattern includes the frequency of publication (daily—weekly—biweekly—monthly—annually) and the method of identifying each issue (by volume—issue—date). This publication pattern must be determined to accurately predict the expected arrival of the next issue in order to use an automated claiming function properly. For example, *The National Law Journal* is published weekly except for two issues combined at year end, with a new volume each year and a new number each week beginning with volume 1 on August 7, 1978; *ABA Journal* is published monthly beginning in January 1970 as volume 70, no. 1; and pocket parts for *Corpus Juris Secundum* come annually in June but bound replacement volumes come as necessary, usually several times during the year.

With collections that frequently include thousands of serial titles, creating the database of records that is the essential foundation of an automated system is a herculean task for a law library. And yet, having done it once, every library that later migrates to a different automation system often must undertake the same daunting job again because the data already created does not transfer to the new system. This in spite of the fact that once the pattern is identified, it will not change—no matter what system a library happens to use—unless and until the publisher changes its policy of publication and distribution.

The vast majority of law libraries house a similar core collection of serial titles, including law reviews, reporters, statutes, looseleaf services, and treatises updated in several different formats. The basic information needed to

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identify each title is the same for each library, as is the information needed to describe a title's publication pattern. In an age in which resources are limited or even decreasing at the same time technology is advancing, the time seems ripe to create a national database of legal serial pattern information that could be shared by any library, much the way bibliographic records are currently shared.

History and Background

For decades every library meticulously prepared its own bibliographic records by cataloging each title in-house. It did not seem to matter that the same book had the same title, author, and imprint in each library. In 1901, the Library of Congress began to supply printed cards and develop a union catalog. The publication of these printed catalog cards became familiar to all librarians in 1948 as the *National Union Catalog*. Librarians now had a source to search before they embarked on the time-consuming and costly task of originally cataloging a new title in their library. If their new title was already cataloged, they could simply "copy" the cataloging already performed. But it was not until 1967 that resource sharing took a big jump with the founding of a consortium of Ohio academic libraries, then known as Ohio College Library Center (OCLC). The growth of OCLC into an international organization with the largest and most successful network of approximately 16,000 member libraries and twenty-seven million shared bibliographic records is one of the great library success stories in resource sharing.¹

A similar resource sharing effort for serial pattern information is a fantasy of many serials librarians. It would avoid reinventing the same serial check-in record in every library. The history of this possibility begins with the publication of *USMARC Format for Holdings and Locations* in 1984.² The purpose of this standard-setting publication was to provide a communications format for carrying holdings and location data from computer to computer, with an emphasis on serials holdings information. The serials committee of the Technical Services Special Interest Section of the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) formed an "Ad Hoc Committee on Standards for Holdings Statements and the MARC Format for Holdings Data" to review the proposed standard, which did not include any legal serial examples. Lorna Tang, Head of Technical Services at the University of Chicago Law Library, served as chair of the ad hoc committee. Mary Ann Van Cura, then of Hamline University Law Library, was an original member of the committee and remembers that "the

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1. Leslie A. Bleil & Charlene Renner, *Copy Cataloging and the Bibliographic Networks*, in *TECHNICAL SERVICES TODAY AND TOMORROW* 96 (Michael Gorman ed., 1990).
 2. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, NETWORK DEVELOPMENT AND MARC STANDARDS OFFICE, *U.S. MARC FORMAT FOR HOLDINGS AND LOCATIONS* (Final Draft 1984).

complexity of the standards and the format validated our intuitive knowledge that the area of holdings was complex and needed bibliographic control."³ That committee envisioned MARC records having current and historical holdings data coded in 85x and 86x fields—with 85x fields containing caption and pattern data and 86x fields containing enumeration and chronology data.⁴ This would allow librarians to download holdings records from a database and edit them to reflect local holdings.

The obvious extension of the publication of *USMARC Format for Holdings and Locations* was the possibility of collecting publication pattern data. Much of the information gathered to determine holdings information would help determine the pattern of the serial publication. The opportunity to share this serial publication pattern in a national database was immediately recognized by librarians involved in this arena. The issue was tossed around for years by serials professionals at ALCTS,⁵ LITA,⁶ NASIG,⁷ SISAC⁸ and CONSER. CONSER is a cooperative program for online serials cataloging started in the early 1970s as the CONversion of SERials and became the COoperative ONline SERials program. In 1990, the CONSER Policy Committee established a task force on a national database for serial publication data. No law librarians were asked to serve on the task force; however, one law librarian, again Mary Ann Van Cura, attended the meetings. Bonnie Postlethwaite, Director of Library Systems at Tufts University, served as consultant to the task force.

Postlethwaite and Linda Miller of the Library of Congress drafted a "Shared Pattern Database Proposal" in 1991. This proposal determined basic areas of focus, players, and issues. Postlethwaite and Miller also developed a "Survey for Locating Sources of Publication Pattern Information" to accompany the proposal.⁹

The path seemed clear with talented leaders in place. A shared database of serials patterns was ready to fly. Then why is your library still reinventing the same serial check-in records? Greg Anderson of MIT Libraries and a member of the CONSER task force determined several reasons, which can be summarized as: (1) a shift in academic library focuses from inward networked information to outward remote access and toward the scholarly knowledge creation process, (2) limited budgets averse to major new initiatives, (3) fast paced changes occurring in automation vendors and bibliographic utilities, and (4) the Library of Congress, which would be a critical player in any pattern database structure, was undergoing reorganization. He said: "The message is

3. Mary E. Clack, ed., *National Shared Pattern Database*, 17 SERIALS REV. 67, 73 (1991).

4. *Id.*

5. Association for Library Collections and Technical Services.

6. Library and Information Technology Association.

7. North American Serials Interest Group, Inc.

8. Serials Industry Systems Advisory Committee.

9. Bonnie Postlethwaite & Linda Miller, *Shared Pattern Database Proposal (1991)* (unpublished manuscript and survey on file with author).

simple: presently libraries, vendors, utilities, and professional organizations are not prepared to make a commitment that involves a high degree of cooperation, control, and currency; our priorities lie elsewhere."¹⁰ After the CONSER Task Force determined the time was not right for a serial pattern database, Postlethwaite thought it was futile to proceed, and no visible progress has since been made.¹¹

Law Library Scene

If the general library world is not ready to eliminate the waste of labor and money required to create duplicative serial check-in records in every individual library, is the law library world ready? I believe law libraries might be more amenable to establishing a shared serial pattern information database for several reasons.

First, law libraries have smaller, more manageable serial collections than do general libraries, with a core collection consisting of the same reporters, statutes, law reviews, looseleaves, and treatises, supplemented with pocket parts or paperbacks. With a discrete collection of manageable size, law libraries have a better chance of creating the database and maintaining it without getting discouraged or running out of money or energy. Second, many of the legal titles come from a small number of publishers which handle their titles in similar patterns. (For example, Matthew Bender and Commerce Clearing House use straight chronological numbering for issues, while the West Publishing Company uses volumes and numbers, etc.) The majority of law reviews are fairly straightforward serials and *Hein's Legal Periodical Checklist* is a valuable resource for determining historical serial patterns. Third, the fact that there does exist a sizable number of serial titles with irregular and complex subscription patterns (state statutes, for instance) means that for these more difficult titles, resource sharing would really pay off. Much time would be saved if a library did not have to figure out answers that other librarians already discovered.

A year ago, as I prepared at the University of Colorado Law Library for a system migration from CARL¹² to INNOPAC,¹³ I faced the hard truth that we would need to create serial check-in records all over again because of the difficulties in migrating CARL records. And knowing that, I was more than ready to share resources with other libraries. There are signs that other librarians are also ready to share serial check-in information.

Leonette Williams, Assistant Director for Technical Services at the University of Southern California Law Library (USC), set the stage for resource

10. 17 SERIALS REV. 71 (1991).

11. Bonnie Postlethwaite (May 11, 1995). *Status of Serial Pattern Database* [e-mail to Georgia Briscoe], [online]. Available e-mail: briscoe@spot.colorado.edu.

12. CARL Corporation's automated library system.

13. The automated library system of Innovative Interfaces, Incorporated of Emeryville, California.

sharing of serial records when she used the INNOPAC check-in records from the University of California at Davis for her library.¹⁴ Sharing these records allowed USC to get “up and running” with their new automation in *half* the time it would have taken to meticulously recreate a serial record for each title.¹⁵ It also allowed them to begin checking in items before they even had their bibliographic records converted to MARC. By first loading Davis’s serial bibliographic and check-in records and then editing the check-in records to reflect USC holdings, they got a major headstart on automation. When USC’s bibliographic serial records were available in MARC format, they simply overlaid the Davis bibliographic records using the RLIN number as a unique identifier.

The University of San Diego (USD) followed the lead of USC when it too acquired the Innovative System. They looked for a similar-sized law library in the same state (California) using the same automation system (Innovative) and the same bibliographic utility (OCLC). The law library at the University of California Hastings College of Law in San Francisco not only met these criteria, but was also willing to sell their serial check-in records to USD for a modest price. Innovative loaded Hastings’ serial records and attached them by OCLC number to the correct USD bibliographic record. Each USD serial was checked in by editing the Hastings serial record to show USD’s holdings. This saved the time that would have been required to determine the publication pattern and create a grid for each serial.

Still another reason that the time seems ripe for creating a shared serial database is the indication that a major vendor of automation systems is interested in taking the lead in this area. Although Dynix is primarily aimed at public libraries and is not used by many law libraries, its newsletter states: “Finding a way to share publication (pub) patterns among our clients has been a top priority for the serials team especially since this is a topic of great interest in serials technology groups. We’ve been involved with the ongoing LITA MARC Holding Interest Group discussion about a national shared database of pub pattern information, but feel that you, our clients, can’t wait that long.”¹⁶ Dynix is therefore setting up a system in which source libraries will become brokers for the publication patterns in their Dynix system. Ed Riding, coordinator of the Dynix serials development team, writes, “Receiving or importing libraries will load these pub patterns into their systems for use with their own matching serials titles. Almost effortlessly, the import library can enjoy the benefits of automated prediction and claiming of new issues, plus an update of the summary of holdings statement.”¹⁷

14. Leonette M. Williams, *Automating with Another Library's Bibliographic Records*, 86 *LAW LIBR. J.* 169 (1994).

15. Leonette Williams (May 18, 1995). *Automating at USC* [e-mail to Georgia Briscoe], [online]. Available e-mail: briscoe@spot.colorado.edu.

16. 6 *Dynix Global Update* 4 (1992).

17. *Id.*

The Proposed Solution

Representing a smaller body of specialty libraries with a more precisely defined literature, it is in the best interests of law librarians to get a project of a law library shared-serial-pattern database on its feet. Each law library that is defining a serial pattern to create a new check-in record is duplicating work already performed in other libraries. The benefits of sharing serial patterns between libraries should be no less than the benefits of sharing cataloging.

Most librarians, with their strong commitment to standards, would agree that the best solution is to create MARC records with properly encoded caption/pattern and enumeration/chronology in a serial database. In the absence of this, some libraries are "making do" by using other library's automated check-in records. If this "make-do" system was refined and formalized it could become a simple and noncostly solution. It would not involve creating a large bureaucracy and could begin almost immediately if vendors were willing to cooperate.

I would like to see all vendors of library automated systems begin the process by offering a legal core collection of serial check-in records to each law library that is starting with or migrating to their system. Vendors could offer the "Serial Check-in Database" as part of their selection of databases. Each vendor could do this by contracting with a well-staffed law library that uses its system to keep the library's serial records in prime condition. The vendor could pay a small royalty to that library for each serial check-in record used or extracted to form the serial check-in database. The extracted serial records could be downloaded and edited by a new library the same way bibliographic records can be downloaded and edited from OCLC and RLIN. If this seemed like too much work, vendors could follow Dynix's lead and allow libraries to easily become "source or receiving" libraries of each other's serials records.

The majority of academic law libraries use Innovative Interfaces for their integrated automation system. This vendor offers the most sophisticated serials module currently available. It was developed with legal serials. It is therefore the system best suited to the complex legal serials and the system that would benefit the largest number of law libraries. Law librarians could lobby Innovative to offer a serial pattern database of Innovative serial check-in records for legal serial titles. All the reasons which halted the earlier progress toward a serial pattern database would not be problems if vendors allow libraries to share or purchase serial check-in records for legal titles. If Innovative could be convinced to offer such a service, law libraries would benefit greatly.

In these days of diminishing resources, increased demands on existing staff, and rapid evolution of automation systems, the time has come for the creation of a shared database for legal serial pattern information. It makes no sense that each law library should have to develop its own database of such information. Such a redundancy of effort can no longer be justified, nor can it be tolerated, given the costs involved and the technologies already in existence.