

Guest Editorial

C&RL Readership Survey



As Chair of the ACRL Publications Coordinating Committee for the last two years, I have taken a keen interest in the policies and procedures of the division's research journal, *College & Research Libraries*. Published since 1939, *C&RL* has established itself as a leading journal in academic librarianship and is important for the new knowledge it brings to our profession as well as the prestige it bestows on our association. Like all scholarly journals, *C&RL* has to adapt to the new and changing networked environment of scholarly communications. As academic librarians, we have watched and influenced changes in scholarly communications in other fields, but when it comes to our own journals, we can more directly experience the controversies and hard decisions involved in changing time honored publishing policies and procedures.

We have seen changes in *C&RL* policies and procedures that do take advantage of the networked environment. An online version of the journal has been available since 1997. Three years ago, the journal instituted a pre-publication service to make accepted manuscripts available online without formal publication delays. *C&RL* authors now own the copyright to their articles and can post them to institutional repositories. The online journal is hosted and backed up by Highwire Press, ensuring reliable access and digital preservation. And just two issues ago, the journal went open access, making all online issues of the journal freely available to readers around the world. This is good progress, but there are always more changes to consider. Should the journal continue to issue a print edition? Are the content and services of the journal serving contemporary readers well? And what about back issues of the journal, from

1939 to 1997, which are still only available in print copy?

In order to answer these questions, the ACRL Publications Coordinating Committee conducted a membership survey in the spring of 2011. Surveys were sent to 10,855 ACRL members, which is the number of members who have allowed ACRL to email them. 1605 members responded, answering at least some of the questions. This was a good response rate—15.8%, when the industry average is less than 2% for similar types of surveys. We compiled the results, and read all 941 comments. In summary, this is what members told us:

- **Will open access to *C&RL* affect your decision to renew membership in ACRL?** Twenty-five percent said that an open access journal made them more likely to renew, or they would renew. Four percent said they were less likely to renew or won't renew. The rest were unsure, or said it did not impact their decision.
- **Would you pay for a print subscription to *C&RL*?** Only four percent said they were willing to pay \$75 for a print copy. Obviously, and regardless of the impact of open access, the option to print copies for a price lacks membership support.
- **In what medium do you prefer to read *C&RL*?** Fewer than ten percent of respondents read *C&RL* cover-to-cover. Sixty-seven percent read *C&RL* only in print. The answer to the question, "How would you prefer to read future issues of *C&RL*?" was mixed. Seventeen percent responded print only, thirty-one percent responded online only, twenty-seven percent said both, and the rest had no preference. Although reading habits and preferences might suggest a soft willingness to view articles online or print them

for future reading, some comments indicated that having a print copy provided a physical reminder to read *C&RL*, whereas one might forget to read the articles online.

- **How can *C&RL* content and services be made more useful?** Comments and suggestions to this question were quite diverse, but several themes emerged. Thirty-two members wanted broader or otherwise different articles; they suggested more articles on technical services and fewer on instruction. Twenty-four members wanted simpler or more practical articles. Smaller numbers wanted more articles on instruction and more theoretical articles. Almost half the respondents wanted email alerts, and a sizable number wanted RSS feeds. Sixteen members wanted the ability to read *C&RL* on a mobile device, and eight members wanted the ability to comment on an article (similar to *Inside Higher Ed*). And finally, twelve members suggested that we make all back issues available online.

These ACRL member comments and suggestions are helpful to us as we plan more changes for *C&RL*. Several services members suggested are already available, but apparently not communicated well. Readers can request alerts whenever a new issue is published. Visit the *C&RL* webpage at <http://crl.acrl.org/>. The banner on the right side has links for both E-mail alerts and RSS feeds. Readers may also comment on individual articles. By clicking an article's PDF link, one can view the entire article embedded within your web browser, and see a series of services, including "Submit a comment," "Alert me when this article is cited," and "Download to citation manager." We are committed to digitizing the print back

file of the journal, and ACRL is actively working with a member research library to get this done in the near future.

One common comment expressed in the survey responses was an expectation that ACRL dues will naturally drop now that *C&RL* is "freely available" online. This is not likely. In fact, costs exceeding revenues may continue to grow. Administrative, editorial, and digital production costs for the journal, of about \$85,000 per year, are not going away. Additional printing and mailing costs will continue as long as we hold onto a print version of the journal. Eliminating the print version of the journal would save an estimated \$100,000 in print production and distribution costs, but this change would also lead to a revenue reduction of \$130,000 as we would end non-member print subscriptions and print advertising revenues. An effective business model (where revenues cover costs) for an open access, online-only version of the journal is still not clear to us.

As you can see, changing policies and procedures for an established journal like *C&RL* is not an easy task. I believe that *C&RL* will eventually need to transition to an online-only dissemination model for all the advantages digital networked access has over the distribution and size limitations of print. The question is when and at what cost? ACRL will not make this decision precipitously. Please know that the *C&RL* Editorial Board and ACRL's Board of Directors, Publications Coordinating Committee, and Budget & Finance Committee take the future of *College & Research Libraries* very seriously and will do all they can to keep the journal vital and relevant to academic librarianship.

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