

A Study of Philatelic Journal Lifetimes

by Len McMaster

Introduction

When I became editor of *Possessions*, one of the questions I asked myself was whether our 34-years of publication, including “short” periods of non-publication, was typical, i.e., where did we rank among all the philatelic journals published over the years. Thus began an unexpected lengthy study of philatelic periodicals published in the United States—the intent being to determine the average lifetime of a philatelic periodical, and explore the reasons for their success or failure over that lifetime.

The study was based primarily on the list of periodicals in *American Philatelic Periodicals* ^[1] as updated in the *World Philatelic Periodicals* ^[2] but was supplemented by Jim Callis' extensive unpublished notes on precancel periodicals ^[3], philatelic society websites, and dialog with current editors of those periodicals still being published. Since this is more or less an attempt at a statistical study, the old saying attributed to many should be remembered that “there are three types of lies—lies, damn lies, and statistics,” and given this caveat, there are likely as many caveats as there are actual findings.

The *World Philatelic Periodicals* listing of periodicals includes over 12,000 entries, over 5,900 in the U.S. alone. Figure 1 is a graphic display of the relative number of journals published in various countries based on the *World Philatelic Periodicals* listing. ^[4,5] However, I have limited my study to only those journals listed as published in the U.S., and from this list of ~5,900 I have attempted to screen out publications that lasted less than one

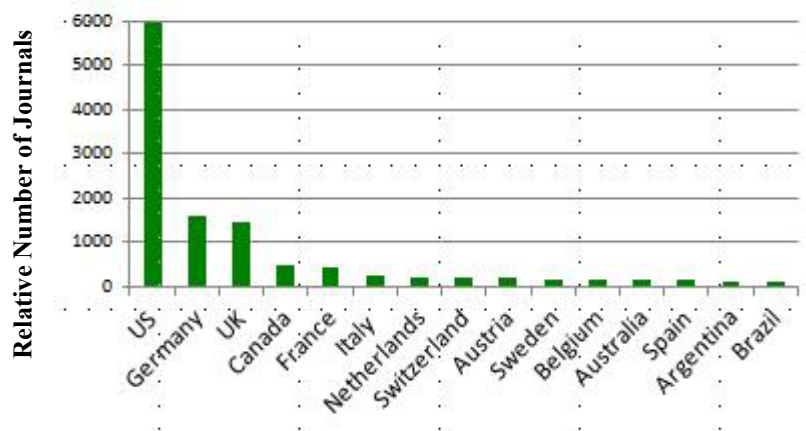


Figure 1. Relative Number of Journals published by Country listed in the *World Philatelic Periodicals* database

year, apparent duplications in the listing, and, where possible, I combined listings of the "same" periodical under different titles, even where there is a short break in the dates published. I have also excluded government publications, less subject to the whims of the stamp collecting, e.g., the *Postmasters Gazette* and *Postal Bulletin*, and non-philatelic focused journals, which only occasionally contain philatelic related articles or other information, e.g., *Manuscript*, journal of the Manuscript Society, and the *Bank Note Reporter*.

I added 93 publications to the list, primarily from three sources: Jim Callis' in-depth study of precancel journals ^[3], the American Philatelic Research Library (APRL) list of "currently received" journals ^[6], and Internet searches of philatelic societies—many society websites and current journal editors were extremely helpful in providing histories of their journals, e.g., dates of name changes and whether it was a different journal, starting over with Vol. 1, No 1.

What I learned from society journal/newsletter editors or other officers was always helpful and occasionally scary, e.g., "... the SAPA [San Antonio Philatelic Association] journal, entitled "Philatex," first appeared in 1946. ... In 1954 the Philatex was named "Volume 1," and this carried through to 1965 with "Volume 12." Volume numbers were not used 1966-1969. In 1970 the journal was entitled "Volume 74" to reflect the age of the club: 74

years old. The volume numbering system continues today with our current year (2012) being “Volume 116.” [7] Thus using volume numbers to indicate length of publication comes with some risks, and may have resulted in some unidentified errors in the *World Philatelic Periodicals* database.

What remains is 1,408 journals including "in-house" magazines such as *James E. Lee's Philately*, society journals, and newsletters—one to two-page print newsletters, such as the *Lincoln Stamp Club Souvenir Sheet*, several page journals/newsletters, such as the Rocky Mountain Philatelic Library's *Scribblings*, 100 plus page print journals such as the APS' *American Philatelist*, and everything in between. Of these 1,408 journals and newsletters, 203 (14%) are still being published. A special caveat should also be mentioned, that I also excluded from the list of 5,900 some 300 entries (5%) that I have been unable to verify the dates of publication. If publication dates could be verified, including them could clearly impact the “total” numbers quoted, e.g., the total sample of 1,408 would be greater and the 203 journals still being published could be greater, but assuming a random nature to when these ~300 journals were published, the averages and other statistical findings should be reasonably correct.



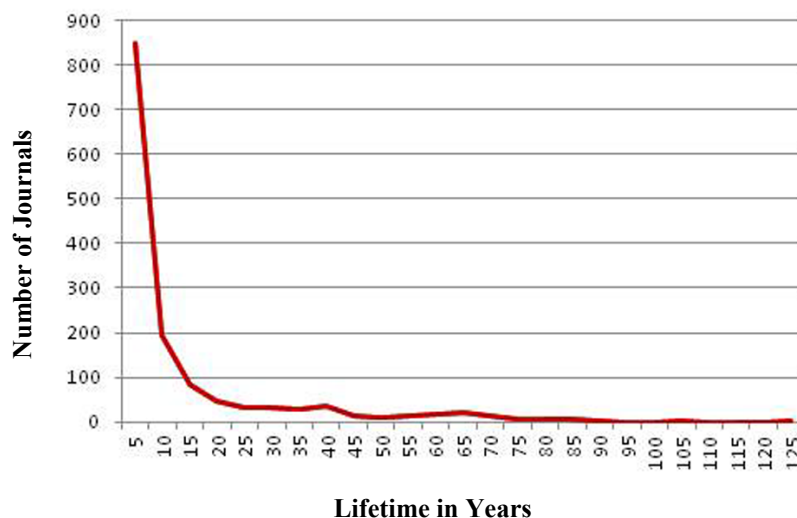


Figure 2. Lifetime Frequency of U.S. Philatelic Journals & Newsletters for all publications sampled

Findings

The first question asked was what was the average lifetime of philatelic publications. Figure 2 shows the lifetime frequency of all 1408 journals sampled. 264 of the journals in the sample lasted only one year, and 849, or 60% of the 1408 journals in the sample, lasted only five or less years, yielding this exponentially decreasing function. The average lifetime is eleven (11) years. The oldest journal/newsletter in the sample is *The Stamp Collector's Record* published from 1864-1876, and the newest are the *AMG Newsletter* [now called the *AMG Courier*] and *Journal of Cuban Philately*, both starting late 2010 to early 2011. The longest continuously published journal is *The American Philatelist* at 102 years, or 125 years depending on whether you count the years between 1887 and 1910 when the APS's official journal was the *Philatelic Journal of America*, *Mekeel's*, and the *Weekly Philatelic Era*, as well as *The American Philatelist*. *Mekeel's Weekly Stamp News* was published 104 years from 1891 to 1995, when it was combined with *Stamps Magazine* and has since been published under the name *Mekeel's & STAMPS*.

Figure 3 is an expansion of the data shown in Figure 2 for journal lifetimes of at least 31 years. (The data is plotted in five year increments

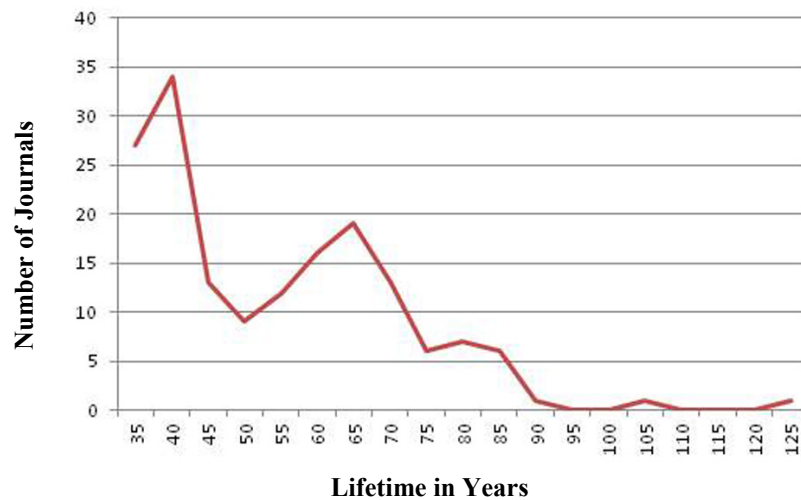


Figure 3. Lifetime Frequency of U.S. Philatelic Journals & Newsletters for all publications sampled lasting ≥ 31 years

such that all the journals lasting 31 to 35 years are plotted at 35 years.) This suggests a bi-modal distribution centered around 40 and 65 years. Figure 4, showing the lifetime frequency of journals that are still being published, exhibits the same bimodal characteristic, suggesting that the bimodal characteristic shown for all publications lasting more than 31 years is

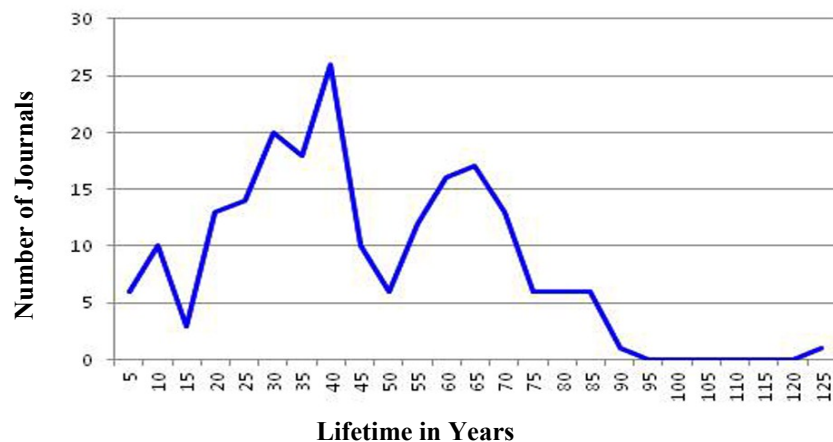


Figure 4. Lifetime Frequency of U.S. Philatelic Journals & Newsletters that are still being published

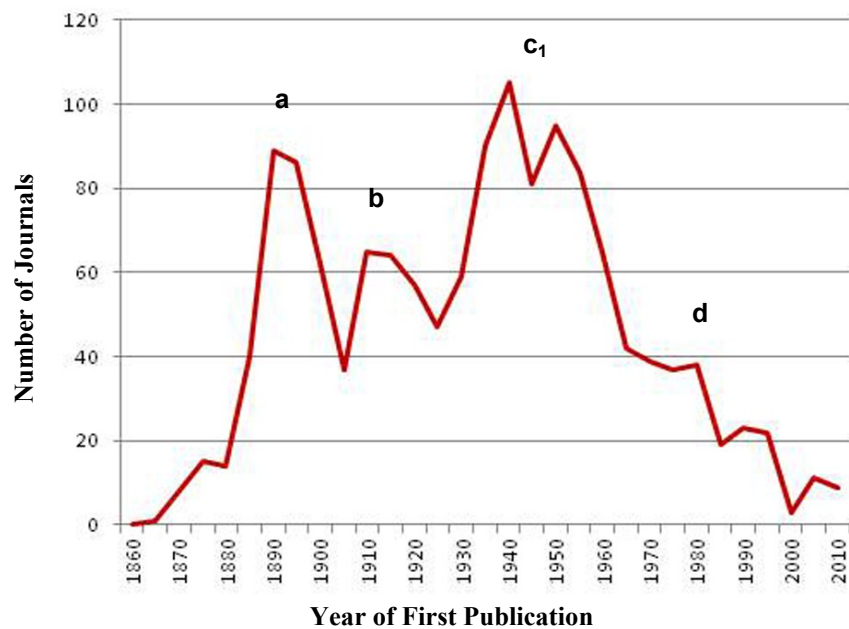


Figure 5. Frequency of U.S. Philatelic Journals & Newsletters Started by Year of First Publication for All Publications

heavily influenced by those journals still being published. This bimodal distribution will be explored later by looking at peak periods of initial publication. The average lifetime of those journals still being published shown in Figure 4 is 43 years.

Figure 5 displays the frequency of new publications started each year for the entire sample of 1408 journals from 1860–2012. The average new starts per year is 10 with a standard deviation of ± 6 . This plot shows three distinct modes, or periods of higher than average number of new journals started. These peak periods of new journals started include (a) 1886–1895, averaging 18 new starts, (b) 1906–1915, averaging 13 new starts, and (c₁) 1931–1955, averaging 18 new starts. While not conclusive one can speculate what may have influenced these peaks. For example, the first period (a) would appear to reflect the early growth of organized stamp collecting in the United States with the peak year of 1894 seeing 24 new starts. Stamp collecting started in the 1850s growing to an estimated 25,000 in the United States by the 1880s. In 1886, the beginning of this peak period, the first national group and forerunner to the American Philatelic

Society, the American Philatelic Association was formed. ^[8] Also in 1886 the Scott Stamp and Coin Co. was formed following John W. Scott's sale of his stamp business and title to the *Scott Catalogue*. ^[9] And in 1893 "the first really big sale in American," in which Scott's prediction of the "thousand-dollar" stamp was realized, when that much was paid for a two-cent British Guiana 1850. ^[10]

The second period (b) , while less pronounced, includes World War I with the peak year of 1915 seeing 19 new starts. "The war [WWI] ... appears to have contributed more to ... [the popularity] than any other factor ... Millions of men were ... hauled off to do battle in strange lands. From there they sent home letters bearing strange postal labels, many people saw foreign postmarks and stamps for the first time. Some kept them for sentimental reasons and in others the unusual stamps and markings awakened that urge to collect which lies deep in most human beings." ^[11]

The third period (c₁) encompasses both post depression era with a maximum of 29 new starts in 1935, and post World War II, with a maximum of 27 new starts in 1948. Called the 'Golden Age' of stamp collecting, "the Great Depression [1929 through the late 1930s or early 1940s] was the spawning ground of stamp dealers. A few years later, with the influx of refugee stamp dealers from Europe, American philately came of age." ^[12]

"Collectors today would be amazed at the strides philately was to make in this period. Each newspaper [New York *Journal*, *Sun*, and *Times*] vied with the other to publicize philately. ... Philately, a children's hobby which adults looked upon tolerantly, was taking giant steps, the like of which had never known nor would ever again know. Weekly stamp magazines sprang up like weeds, and the monthly magazines with which collectors had been content for so long found that they no longer held the attention of collectors. Philatelic impatience was the order of the day" ^[13]

"A president of the United States [Franklin D. Roosevelt, president from 1933–1945] who collected stamps gave a dignity to what any had considered Kid's stuff. ... Millionaires found that their vaulted security holdings shrank to next to nothing, while their extensive stamp collections not only held their value but actually increased. ... " ^[14]

The Third International Philatelic Exhibition (TIPEX) held in New York in 1936 was later to be described as "the outstanding philatelic promotion of all time. Newspaper publicity, magazine articles, special

sections in publications of national circulation, popular books on stamps, all combined to bring to Grand Central Palace the largest assemblage of persons to pay their way into a stamp show up to that time." ^[15]

This period also included the beginning of the *Stamps for the Wounded* program, which would have contributed to the growth of collectors and likely their interest in society membership and journal subscriptions. *Stamps for the Wounded* (still active today) was founded in 1942 by collector Ernie Kehr responding to the request of a friend from a veterans hospital. Initially taking stamps from his own collection, and later enlisting the support of President Roosevelt, the program grew into a national effort to provide some activity for hospitalized veterans who were bedridden, and experiencing long term treatment. ^[16] Anecdotally Michael Bush writes about his father that "while convalescing in the hospital during 1944 ... the recuperating G.I.'s ... [among other material to read] were also given stamp magazines," which ultimately led to his father, Joseph Bush, becoming not only a collector, but a dealer specializing in post World War II Allied Military Government (AMG) stamps. ^[17]

Another feature of this period worth noting is the small decline in new starts during the war years from 1941-1945 (plotted at 1945). In his introduction to *The Best of Herst's Outbursts*, Pat Herst notes that "During the war, when paper became scarce, the OUTBURST was discontinued, not to be resumed until peace came to the world." ^[18] Thus the war had both positive and negative influences on stamp collecting and the philatelic journals that served our hobby.

Figure 6 displays the frequency of new publications started each year for the 203 journals started from 1860–2012 that are still being published. This plot shows two distinct modes, or periods of higher than average number of new journals started. These peak periods of new journals started include (c₂) 1941–1960, and (d) 1971–1985. The first of these two periods (c₂) includes a 15-year overlap with the c₁ period of the start date frequency for all 1408 journals shown in Figure 5, i.e., covering both the tail end of the post depression, World War II and post war periods; but the frequency is quite different. For the whole sample the average new starts per year was 18, but the average new starts per year for those journals that are still publishing is only three (3); or put another way an average of 15 new starts per year are no longer publishing. While many new magazines were started in this period, many "other magazines started, flourished, and fell by the wayside as the field, a few short years before a wide-open one, became

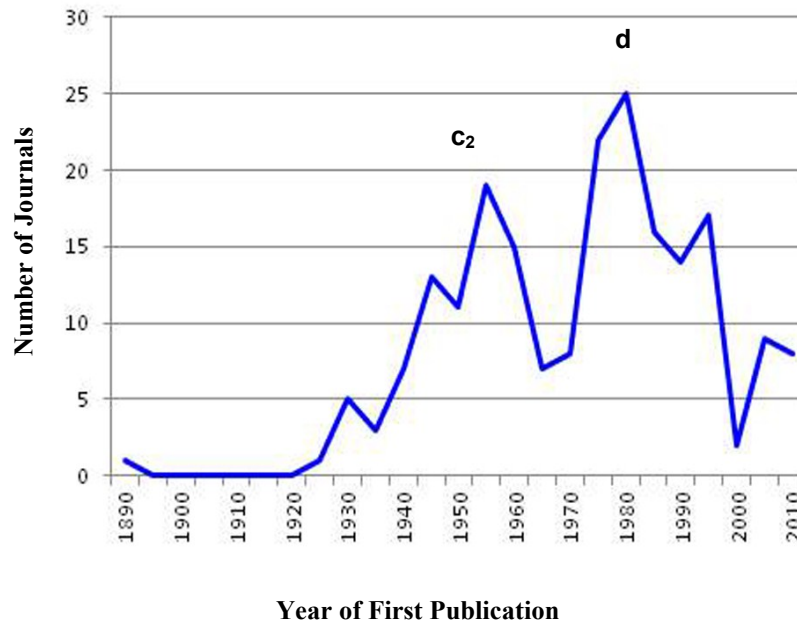


Figure 6. Frequency of U.S. Philatelic Journals & Newsletters Started by Year of First Publication for Publications Still Being Published

overcrowded." ^[19]

The second of these two periods (d) runs from 1971–1985. While less obvious in the frequency of new starts for all journals, once identified, it can be seen in the larger sample and is indicated on Figure 5. Again the frequency in the two samples is different—the average new starts per year for all journals is six (6), whereas the average new starts per year for those journals that are still publishing is only four (4). What is less clear is what happened during the 15-year period from 1971–1985 that influenced this increase in new starts. At the beginning of this period, in 1971, the United States Postal Service (USPS) started operations (the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970 abolished the United States Post Office Department, and created the USPS), and may have contributed to this surge in new starts.

Discussion

So what does all this tell us? To start with, and to answer the question I initially posed, *Possessions*' 34-year existence is three times the overall

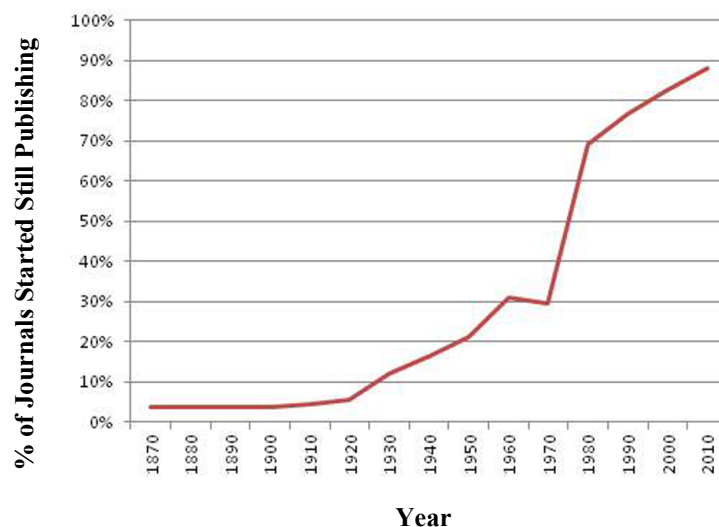


Figure 7. Percent of Journals Started Still Publishing by Year of Initial Publication

average of 11 years, but shorter than the 43 year average of those journals still being published. We have encountered periods of *Possessions* not being published on a regular basis, but so have many of the other journals in the sample; and we have survived the “infant mortality” that plagued many journals, particularly in the early history of our hobby.

In general philatelic journals and newsletters are the lifeblood of our hobby since they “... contain huge ranges of information about collecting specialties (and all sorts of other material) that cannot be found in any published books... as well as large amounts of additional background information on topics that have been the subject of books.” [20] So the fact that the trend in overall print journal/newsletter new starts is declining as observed in Figure 5 (the average new starts in the past ten years is only two) is unsettling because it could suggest a decline in interest, but the fact that more of the journals are lasting longer (see Figure 7) and the appearance of electronic newsletters and blogs, suggests it is only a reflection of the maturity of our hobby and the evolution to electronic media.

While this study did not include electronic journals/newsletters a few comments seem appropriate. First there is a trend in many philatelic organizations to publish both an electronic and print version of their

journal/newsletter, in some cases tied to the cost of membership. For example, the International Philippine Philatelic Society offers a reduced membership fee for those interested in receiving only an "E-version" of their quarterly journal, the *Philippine Philatelic Journal*; membership in the Rocky Mountain Philatelic Library entitles you to a print version of their newsletter, *Scribblings*, but is available on-line for anyone; and currently membership in the American Philatelic Research Library (APRL) entitles you to both a print and electronic version of the *Philatelic Literature Review*. Second there is a proliferation of electronic only media, including the more general Virtual Stamp Club, and specialized blogs like the APRL's *Philatelic Literature & Research* blog and John Langlois' *1898 Revenues* stamp blog. This move to electronic media in the philatelic world impacts the analysis of the print media statistics in many ways.

With respect to large infant mortality observed in the early years of stamp collecting and print journal publication, there is an interesting article in the September 1901 *The Bay State Philatelist* that discusses the difficulties of publishing a "philatelic paper" and the reason for so many disappearing. In it the author observes that,

"It is so easy to start a stamp paper. The means necessary are within almost every would-be publisher's reach. A small printing press with a few fonts of type, a lean treasury, abundance of enthusiasm and courage, with plenty of time at his disposal, all combined, is one vehicle of entrance for one aspirant for journalistic honor, who, "just for the fun there is in it," informs the public that he is about to issue in the interest of Philately Vol. 1 No.1 etc.

"The various stages of setting up printing, folding and mailing the initial number goes on apace. When the first number is an assured fact, great is the satisfaction and expectations of the embryo editor and his near friends. Excepting from personal friends who subscribe, he does not receive the anticipated flood of subscriptions. Nowise daunted, with scarcely less zeal, No. 2 is prepared and distributed. The Government, in fostering spirit, grants his publication the low rate of second class postage without which it would succumb at once. Numerous small expense items constantly accrue; whose aggregate quickly disposes of what cash he has on hand liquidate. The issuing of No. 3 creates a deficit, that is made good by some appreciative

friend. No. 4 is sent out late; likewise No.5. The editor's enthusiasm has cooled considerably; and success does not loom up so prominently and brightly as it did at first. The work drags, becomes less interesting, and after a while discouragement overwhelms him. Without warning, only to those intimately connected or interested, publication is suspended, and a rival sheet finally absorbs what little assets the paper possessed. ..." ^[21]

It might be argued that it is not as easy to start/edit a print publication today, due to the computer equipment, specialized software and skills required to interface with today's publishers, or the higher cost of printing and mailing. ^[22] However, the point implied above is that it was the individual who already possessed the necessary equipment (printing press), skills and interest who started the publications, and this is as likely as true today as in 1901, i.e., it is the individual with the computer equipment, skills and interest today who is likely to start a new publication. The cost of a computer, printer/scanner and necessary software is likely equivalent in constant year dollars to owning a printing press, and the necessary computer equipment is likely already owned by those individuals. And with access to the Internet one does not need a printing press today to start an on-line newsletter or blog about one's interest. As mentioned above, however, without the necessary sponsorship or interest shown by others, even the most enthusiastic newcomer to the field will lose interest in continuing.

One explanation for the decline in new print publications is this very growth of electronic newsletters and blogs. Another is that with the proliferation of specialist journals in existence now and in the past (readily accessible through several philatelic libraries), there are arguably fewer and fewer new, un-explored areas to pursue; and for those unexplored areas, the required subject matter knowledge is much greater to be successful. ^[22]

Transferring the role of the editor of an existing print publication to a new individual is a different problem than starting a new publication, however, especially if the journal has a specialized focus. The individual with the interest or specialized knowledge may not own the necessary equipment or skill, and acquiring such just to edit a journal may seem like a daunting task that the individual is unwilling to accept.

And finally, while not statistically relevant, i.e., anecdotal in nature only, in my interaction with current and former journal editors, the most frequently cited reason for termination or gaps in print publication was the

death of the editor or other major contributor to the organization, and the unexplained gradual loss of subscribers/members.

Death without replacements could also account for some of the gradual loss of subscribers/members, but I would speculate that this loss is as much due to the suggested reduction of new material included or loss of relevance of the material to the members/subscribers, an issue that worries me and should encourage us to constantly ask our members/subscribers what they would like to see.

End Notes

1. Chester M. Smith, Jr., *American Philatelic Periodicals*, American Philatelic Research Library, State College, PA, 1978
2. Chester M. Smith, Jr. *World Philatelic Periodicals*, American Philatelic Research Library, Bellefonte, PA, 1996. http://stamps.org/userfiles/file/library/World_Philatelic_Periodicals
3. Jim Callis, private communication, March 4, 2012
4. Table 2. Number of Periodicals by Country, http://stamps.org/userfiles/file/library/World_Philatelic_Periodicals/intro.htm
5. Described as “relative number” because my research found numerous “duplications and errors” in the U.S. listing and I have assumed that a proportional number of “duplications and errors” would be found in the listing for other countries.
6. Betsy Gamble, APRL, private communication, March 20, 2012
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22. John Hotchner, private communication, August 15, 2012

