
Editorial - swansong

Well, my *Who's Who* entry is now amended to read, proudly: "Editor *LIRN* 1997-2001". This is my last opportunity in these pages to pontificate, trumpet blow, and to bemoan the apparent lack of feedback from the readership. Writing editorials has been fun: whether they make the slightest impact is another matter - but the least I can hope is that some of you have read them from start to finish more often than not, and that you have been intrigued and amused from time to time!

This issue is late - as usual you may say - but that has the unplanned bonus that I can write here about the significant events that happened last week at the **Manchester UMBRELLA Conference**. This is the Library Association's biennial 'away days' thrash that, consciously or unconsciously, resembles the annual IFLA Conferences. Too much going on for any comprehensive account to be attempted - but certain events of particular significance for the research community.

First there was a LIRG Committee meeting - warming up with the detailed considerations and negotiations involved in the proposition that the Group becomes more formally integrated with the new unified professional body. Committee meetings in 2001 and 2002 are likely to be of more substantive interest as this develops. The principles are well expounded below in the 'Group News' section of this issue.

The committee had been timed so that members could attend a BAILER Workshop *Linking Research and Practice*. Here Graham Matthews and Anne Goulding recounted *inter alia* how much research had been undertaken in recent years in academic departments for and about public libraries. Then Martin Molloy spoke from his practical experience as a Chief Librarian of the important features of research in 'making things happen' and of the need for good research to 'prove the impact' and to

'deliver the agenda'. Hopefully the essence of these papers may be available for *LIRN* readers either in a future issue of *LIRN* or elsewhere.

While their treatment of central research issues was altogether admirable, cries of alarm were also present. The administrative migration of the LIC into RESOURCE had removed a large chunk of research funding and threatened to weaken research even further. With the abandonment of the transparent publicity practised by LIC it is difficult nowadays to know just how much research is being commissioned by RESOURCE - with unpublicised commissions being tendered for by selected groups only. There is more going on than is publicised, but just how much is uncertain. Almost certainly public library research is an even poorer second to the relatively lavish efforts of JISC in the academic library sector.

One answer suggested was that the Library Association in the UK might follow the example of the ALA in the States and of LIANZA in New Zealand and take a more proactive role in initiating and funding research itself. There are also signs in its latest policy announcements that the British Library is looking to a wider role more akin to what national libraries do in most overseas countries. International comparisons at this level are too infrequent and should be taken more seriously.

RESOURCE Policy

If our prayer mats had been deployed there - with some pessimism - the gloom was to be surprisingly soon dispelled in the keynote speech opening the main Conference by Lord Matthew Evans, Chair of RESOURCE. In effect this amounted to an eloquent and diplomatic back pedalling on the policy that RESOURCE had adopted in its first two years of concentrating almost exclusively on activities that spread across its three domains - Museums, Archives and Libraries - with museums grabbing the most colourful attention of the three.

Lord Evans introduced a fresh consultation paper *Building on Success: An Action Plan for Public Libraries* with key features as follows:

"While it is clear there are substantial areas of common interest across Resource's three domains, it is also essential to recognise and celebrate the differences between them. . . . Resource has an advocacy role, both in demonstrating to Government the value of the outcomes public libraries deliver, and in advising on funding needs to ensure that those outcomes can be sustained."

In answering questions Lord Evans admitted the need to extend the public library interest to academic and other libraries. "We also wish to link our public libraries work to issues of relevance to the wider libraries community, particularly with academic and special libraries."

The role of research to develop the People's Network has always been obvious: "we will also need to commission longitudinal research into the impact of libraries on learning," and, "Resource plans to provide the information that will be needed to argue the case for increased capital investment . . ." Not forgotten is the need for "a Task Force to advise on regional library issues, with similar terms of reference to those of the present Regional Museums Task Force." Some may bemoan that this recognition of the need for sectoral initiatives as well as cross sectoral has taken so long to be recognised: some time has been lost. But at least this shows that Resource has listened to the professional and research community.

The ways in which the Internet will be exploited by Libraries, Museums and Archives are all very exciting and will exhibit significant similarities and differences - well worth research and study as they develop. There was an important session on this at Manchester. Unfortunately it attracted only a small audience, so the interdisciplinarity message has some way still to go!

There is no suggestion that the cross sectoral agenda be dropped; there is still much mileage to be had from continuing cross sectoral policies and activities in future. Rather the

whole can be put into a more realistic perspective once it is admitted that sectoral concerns need attention in their own right as well.

The points of commonality and the points of difference are legion and make fascinating analysis. One mundane aspect should not be forgotten: typically libraries deal with multiple copies of stuff - whether in the same or different collections: typically museums and archives deal with one off unique items and not multiple copies. This is an essential though practical difference. However, as digitisation draws on, it may lose its significance when the copies of the artefacts housed in museums and archive collections become widely available on the web. Art reproductions can never equal the power of the original; but 'web spreading' can be a good second best where no 'second best' existed before.

The contrast between libraries and museums in their charging mechanisms and policies was one of the topics that came up in the research project on **The Economic Value of Public Libraries** which took up the best part of my own time in 2000. Usually visits to a museum are infrequent and involve substantial expenditure of time and travel money for the viewer: usually visits to the library are relatively short, occur every day, week, or month, and they are fitted in with other visits - shopping, lectures, etc. The visiting patterns are not at all the same.

This research, in which the charging question has only a minor share, is:

Anne Morris, Margaret Hawkins & John Sumsion **THE ECONOMIC VALUE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES**. London, RESOURCE 2001. p. 374 Library & Information Commission Research Report 89. ISBN 1902394518. Available as paper bound photocopy or microfiche (price £12) from the British Library Thesis Service, British Library Document Supply Centre, Boston Spa, Wetherby, West Yorkshire LS23 7BQ, UK.

A summary of the Report and of the Project is available on the web at <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ls/disresearch/econvalu.html>.

Much of the data for this report came from the *CIPFA PLUS User Survey* - a remarkably successful venture which has, until now, received little publicity. In concept this was a standard user survey developed by the library community and adopted voluntarily in over two thirds of the country. The basis was simple: why have separate surveys when one national one will have advantages of comparability and efficiency? The data analysis had been made much more meaningful by including personal data for respondents so that cross factor analysis is feasible to describe not only what people did on their visit to the library but also what sort of people did what - by age, gender, race, education, etc. More detail and example results are available in the forthcoming number of *IFLA JOURNAL* (see below). Now in CIPFA's latest statistics *Public Library Actuals* these survey results are put into the public domain so that what was semi-private information is now generally available for discussion. This is an important development for research - both in this public library area and also as a model for other sectors - even though it may be many years behind the USA's *Public Library Data Service*!

Library statistics

Changing tack, but still less inhibited in discussing my own work than if this were not my swansong (!) I would like to encourage readers to glance at the next number of *IFLA JOURNAL*. I was asked to guest edit a special number devoted entirely to 'Library Statistics'. Apart from the fact that I had never been asked to 'guest edit' anything before, this must be one of the very rare occasions when a whole journal number risks exclusive devotion to such a conversation stopping topic as 'Library Statistics'! See what you think: my aim has been to show both the wide variety, the progressive trends in evidence, and some challenging thinking. But one point of general interest came out of this exercise - reflections on *Why are library statistics so dull?*

Generally speaking the statistics librarians assemble to justify their budget requests and the statistics that show the changes in their own library over the last 5 or 10 years are far from

dull - to them. However, when it comes to comparative league tables, dullness immediately sets in. This is because most results are in the solid centre, in clusters around the average. Does it really matter whether you are 54th or 68th if both are within 5 per cent of the average anyway? No, that is not of much interest - even if the picture is not confused by questions of dubious data collection. What is of interest of course is which few libraries come top, which few come bottom or where your library is not 5 per cent but 50 per cent above or below the average. So we get to Sumsion's new Law of Statistical Dullness: "In comparative statistics the great majority of results are inherently close to the average and consequently dull".

The corollary of this is what is important. It is the Outliers, the unusual quirk results where the interest lies. In straightforward management terms we all know this is true; it is the sudden upward leap that points to something being out of control and needing investigation. Half the time these outliers may be no cause for concern - where someone has accidentally slipped in a couple of extra noughts or the wrong data file has been processed. But half the time something extra good or extra bad is shown up, and that is where the interest lies.

In practical terms I doubt anyone will dissent: in theoretical terms this is explained by Stephen Bensusan in a philosophical/mathematical article on Fuzzy Sets and the theory of Outliers. It may take two readings to appreciate, but - if you can get hold of a copy of the *IFLA JOURNAL* - your mind will be stretched and your horizons expanded. And there's a lot more about the links between statistics and research than I dare mention in these paragraphs that verge on 'the commercial'!

Contents of this issue

The major article this time is Leif Kajberg's description of the research scene at the Royal School in Copenhagen. It was his idea that *LIRN* readers might find this of interest, but something that I warmly endorse. It does us no harm to see yet again how, through their generous funding provision, Scandinavian governments place much higher value on their

libraries as part of 'the good life' than we do here. The structure and the content of their research are meticulously described - so that the article can serve as a description of record for some time to come, of special relevance to *LIRN* readers in BAILER institutions and in teaching and research departments worldwide.

The article is, however, of relevance in another sense. A possible initiative for *LIRN*, already mooted to BAILER, is to list on a regular basis the topics and main results contained in those Master's dissertations that have been awarded a distinction mark or are otherwise distinguished. Another possibility being discussed is to carry articles on a rolling basis describing the research scene in UK Higher Education teaching departments - with possible extensions to other countries as well. I know my successor as Editor, Elizabeth Gadd, is already thinking of developments along these lines, and the LIRG Committee is supportive. So, when reading of the Copenhagen scene, think of comparative accounts in the UK and in other countries that might follow this lead!

The second main article, by Ferguson and Crawford, was stimulated by Hewitson's prize winning entry in the last issue. It is similar in context and in conclusions. Perhaps now we should try to move on to some more extensive counting of the results of electronic networking - to counts in their tens, hundreds, and perhaps thousands the numbers of people and activities, affected by the digital revolution which is now well advanced from its prototype stage. While any ideal solution is still difficult to envisage, database suppliers are already producing all sorts of data which could be studied pragmatically for its difference and similarity.

Now for the signing off moment. I have every confidence that Elizabeth Gadd, who takes over now as Editor, will effectively put right what still needs correcting and will develop this journal to its greater potential. Her experience in running 'lis-copyseek' will be invaluable, and many of you will already know her in that context. In addition I am sure she will enjoy this editorship - though that is partly up to you

the readers to keep up a flow of articles and short communications, plus comments and suggestions via the Group web site. For my part I must admit to have greatly enjoyed the past four years in the editor's chair: I crave your indulgence for the shortcomings - of which there have been plenty!

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