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## Editorial

In his 1999 Annual Lecture Peter Brophy called for LIS researchers to be more outward looking, to take on board the concerns of neighbouring disciplines and research methods used elsewhere. I have been urging for years a more international attitude to research issues. Do you suppose we would award any prizes for outward looking research initiatives since then? Judging from my own limited experience, I suspect not.

True, Chris Batt and a few others have been to the States to see at first hand how far ahead their public libraries are with public access PCs and networking. Some university librarians are well up on developments in the States. But most UK research projects do not even get as far as asking the question whether there might be answers overseas, before ploughing into the research programme.

Increasingly as libraries develop their own web sites (often fantastically handsome and easy to navigate) getting hold of comparative information is not difficult - once you know what is there. But knowing where to look is the real problem, and search engines are only helpful some of the time. This is where *LIRN* has an opportunity - to act as a sounding board for people to exchange experience on what they have found interesting and valuable, which they would like to share with the membership and other readers. This concept came up at the last LIRG Committee and was enthusiastically endorsed. For many situations a hard copy stimulus is more effective than simple web presence.

The idea is to encourage you to write short pieces, half a page will do, describing briefly any research data or results that seem to you to be particularly useful or interesting. 'Goodies you have found on the www that you think others in LIRG should know about.'

The actual writing should be as time saving as possible: in many cases you can cut and paste an extract from something longer that is already written! What we have not yet settled is a smart name for such contributions: for the time being they are described as **SHORT COMMUNICATIONS** in the revised Guidelines for Authors on the inside

cover. Meanwhile the rest of this Editorial should give you some concrete examples of appropriately exciting content - that is 'exciting' at least to me, and hopefully to many of you too!

Looking outside L.I.S. some parallels came up in connection with research into the *economic value of public libraries* - an area that has taken up most of my available time these past eighteen months (report in press). The first, and most recent, is a Home Office Research Study *The economic and social costs of crime* noticed through a brief newspaper report. The publication has an ISBN, is handsomely produced (88 pages), and is free. This latter attribute, the no charge, may yet ensure a limited circulation: how many of your libraries simply ignore what is free? It will hardly figure in library suppliers' lists!

What its economist authors have done is to take the plunge and put the best monetary estimates they can devise onto major types of crime. These are further broken down into

- Costs in anticipation of crime (preventive measures)
- Losses as a consequence of crime (personal, emotional, property) *and*
- Costs in response to crime (detection, courts, prison, etc.)

Whether or not one agrees with the partly subjective estimates put against victims' traumatic experiences, the exercise of comparing types of crime and types of effect is rewarding and produces a convincingly new perspective. It succeeds in meeting the stated aim of the research: "to stimulate debate and improvements in the evidence." A splendidly simple statement directly applicable to our own field where L.I.S. research should "stimulate debate, improve the service, and improve our knowledge of the service."

There is a further, and more technical, parallel in inadequate information on costs:

"The only reliable information on police costs that is readily available at present is the cost of the total police budget. This budget must be split into resources that are crime-related and those that are not in order to estimate the police resources devoted to crime. No national estimates of the allocation of police resources are currently available." (p.30)



We may well have more complete cost data, but they are still inadequate to distinguish resources spent on Book loans, Audio-visual loans, Information, Other services, and Buildings.

Then there are economic and social features outside the scope of this research. How do you cost out the effect on house prices - higher in low crime areas, lower where crime is high? How to estimate the negative value of poor shopping offered in high crime areas? There are parallels in methodology where a first class library adds indefinable amounts to the quality of life of the whole community, not just of individual users.

Also in connection with economics, and more specifically with the question whether or not to charge for services, we found interesting economics literature in the USA on National Parks and in the UK a recent study for the Museums & Galleries Commission: *To charge or not to charge?* 1999. In very broad terms what the museums and national parks found was that entry charges were often only a small part of the expense of an infrequent visit and, in consequence, did not encounter high levels of opposition. The most significant distinction was between occasional full day (or week) excursions and regular short distance visits that characterise some use of local museums and most public library use.

The other parallel was to do with the manner in which charges were imposed or raised. Gradual step by step increments were much more acceptable, in practice, than sudden jumps.

If the main aim of research is "to stimulate debate and improvements . . ." we should have more **success stories**. I was reminded how good libraries can be on a second visit to Hounslow Central Library. Although built in the early 1980s this is still a handsome friendly place slap in the middle of the main shopping mall. There is a feeling of spaciousness and respect for staff and users as individuals in the furnishings and the friendly low level enquiry stations. I am told that its strong audio-visual collection is a tradition going back to the 1960s: its strong Asian language collections attract users from neighbouring boroughs. It would be good to know more of the reasons why it is so good, and - even more importantly - what prevents many other London boroughs from following its example. Can the Annual Library Plans and Best Value exercises have such an effect?

Lessons could be drawn from the world of retailing. Retailers assess the potential business to be done on a site by counting the rate of passing pedestrians. How far is this technique useful in decisions on siting libraries?

Then there are other success stories that have come to mind recently:

- The enormous Cambridge University Library is an example of forward planning that has worked as well as any. In the 1950s it must have been unique for a library of its size to allow readers to access the open stacks. The arrangement is basically unchanged to-day - although, of course, extra extensions have had to be provided from time to time.
- How much more productive is the operation now that most catalogue records are created centrally and dispersed electronically rather than created on card at every acquisition library? (This point is repeated in the review of Chapman & Spiller's report below.)
- Just how good is EARLweb - the portal for public library users that has been co-operatively developed and is now available - to save public libraries reinventing this particular wheel up and down the country? It seems remarkably good to me, but it could do with more expert commendation and publicity!
- Then there is the very large success story under the banners of Elib, JANET, and BIDS. It is fashionable in some quarters to claim that the post Follett development money could have been spent more leanly and more systematically. Hindsight can be dangerous! The main point of that exercise was to change the culture throughout HE libraries so that resources in new formats could be readily accepted. Such cultural change has taken place on a huge scale - witness Andrew Hewitson's article below and countless contributions to *LIRN* in recent years.

One reason for writing in this vein is that it may be time to take stock as IT developments reach a bedding down stage. The People's Network is pushing public libraries into IT networking fast. HE libraries have an array of electronic sources where the rest of this decade may see their spread rather than transition to further new unknowns. As we move from the *WHETHER?* question to the *HOW?*



and HOW BEST? questions, there are important practical research issues to be addressed:

- Where do the printers go? Next to the PCs or at the circulation desk?
- Can users expect answers to telephone enquiries not only on information sources (print and web) but also to help with software problems? How can this be arranged to avoid queues and non response?
- As Access rather than Holdings policies take over, is it right to levy heavy ILL charges when the library saves the book purchase cost? In public libraries, is it legal? Why do public libraries charge so much less for ILLs than HE libraries?
- What is the data that publishers can provide on use of their database information? Can/should it be standardised?

Well, that last question ties things up. It's a vital issue; we need to look outwards to involve the publishers; and it is very much the concern of Elizabeth Gadd's meaty and topical contribution here on the photocopying issue. If only she had had the opportunity for a trip to the USA to compare our negotiating experience with theirs!

My thanks to all our present contributors. My apologies for the lateness of this number - originally planned for last October. My request for at least one 'short contribution' from each one of you, please, during 2001.

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## References

Sam Brand and Richard Price, *The economic and social costs of crime. Home Office Research Study*. London: 2000. ISBN 1 84082 5723; ISSN 0072 6435.

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds>

Email: [publications.rds@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:publications.rds@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk)

EARLweb: <http://www.earl.org.uk/earlweb/index.html>

*To charge or not to charge?* 1999. London, Museums & Galleries Commission.

## Group News

### ANNUAL LECTURE & ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING March 15th, 2001

The LIRG Annual Lecture and AGM will take place on Thursday 15th. March 2001 in the Conference Room at the Bloomsbury Theatre Building, 2nd Floor, 15 Gordon Street, London, WC1. We are delighted that Lynne Brindley, Chief Executive of the British Library, will be giving this year's annual lecture.

The programme will be as follows:

2.00 AGM

(Note: The Meeting will discuss whether LIRG should apply to become a Special Interest Group (SIG) of the new professional body (LA/IIS).

2.30 Presentation of Elsevier/LIRG Award and LIRG Prizes

3.00 Tea

3.30 "Challenges for the British Library in the 21st century".

Lynne Brindley, Chief Executive, British Library

4.30 Close

### Postgraduate Prize

The 2000 LIRG Postgraduate Student Prize has been awarded to Cheryl Twomey, University of North London, for her dissertation *An analysis of the design and quality of patient information leaflets supplied with medicines sold by pharmacists in the United Kingdom*.