

Editorial

Is this the time for dreams and visions? Hybrid dreams maybe – with ‘hybridity’ now extended to encompass museums and archives in the same envelope as libraries? Is there an insurmountable gap developing with the younger generation – adept beyond measure at picking out relevant data from the web and even more incompetent than their elders in locating relevant printed stuff? How to reconcile the prospects of a glorious new age ahead with funding constraints that threaten even that which is now provided?

Are we yet on a plateau worth describing, or is the pace of change so rushed and hectic that any bird’s eye view is out of date as soon as it is written?

‘Taking stock’ or ‘midsummer madness’?

Well, there is a sense, here in the UK, that this is a time for taking breath between races. The Library & Information Council went out in a profusion of really valuable policy papers and reviews – as we noted in our last number – that will take some time to digest and work through. The successor body – ‘Re:source: *the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries*’ – is busy reorganising its staff, initiating further reviews, and has now produced a very general Manifesto containing a detailed Action Plan and Budget for 2000/2001. [details at www.resource.gov.uk]

Much of this was covered in the work of the House of Commons Select Committee on Public Libraries [HC 241]. While this is available for browsing on the web¹, the hard copy – in this instance – is very much easier to read, navigate and appreciate. It makes fascinating reading; the formal evidence submitted by organisations will be a Godsend to future library historians. Questioning of professional experts by perceptive outsiders meant that fundamental features got the airing they deserve – without being clogged by detail. The same characteristic, you may remember, was the strength of the Follett Report eight years earlier!

In the academic library world there is organisational change too as the eLib programme and personnel assume new guises. However, the achievements of

JANET and the enlightened stance of JISC toward research and development for academic libraries contrast with the threat to research funding that may or may not materialise in the new approach of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

Whatever else is going on, the large scale, generously funded, People’s Network development gathers impressive pace. Progress on this is evident (in this number of *LIRN*) in the account of Susi Woodhouse’s LIRG Annual Lecture – and the need for ICT Training on a large scale is highlighted in Barbara Hull’s timely research on its social inclusion aspect. There are signs that, in a few years, public libraries will be catching up on JANET – and perhaps much more.

So how might all this relate to our Dreams for the future? Let’s restrict ourselves to three:

First, there is Information for All – the WHERE aspect. Where people have heretofore had to go to a large library to seek information from the Reference Room, now there is the potential to make this available via the web in every small branch library, perhaps in community centres and village post offices, and certainly to punters with a PC + modem at home. It is a revolution in communication structure. It is going to happen – and there are models in the USA, Canada and Singapore to look at where they are some years ahead of the UK: it would be good to know more about their present practice.

Second, there is Information for All – the WHAT aspect. Obviously we can expect local government information, local community information, and access to whatever national information is made freely available. With the emphasis that Re:source is now putting on its three branches we shall certainly have access to museums holdings and whatever archive information is computerised.

After that there is the potential for access to a world of commercially published information (for example, *Who’s Who?* *Encyclopedia Britannica*, *KnowUK*). Commercial publishers can be relied upon to come up with the goods, but such information will need to be paid for. When it comes to national government information, let us hope that the government will modify the commercial remit of the Stationery Office so that all its public

information can be freely available on the People's Network. Strangely there has been little open discussion of this in the Freedom of Information debate though there are encouraging signs behind the scenes.

In its emphasis on the cultural sector the Re:source Manifesto says little about access to commercial databases and to what is published by other government departments. It would be tragic if the People's Network were to be at all limited in this respect.

Third, principally in the world of academia, there is the dream of instant access to any and all text cited in articles at the press of the web button. Associated with this would be the facility to search for reviews (and comments) via the object article.

Here the obstacles are not so much technical as legal and commercial. The answers may well lie in a complete change from the present practice of copyright permissions to retrospective sampling arrangements as the basis for remunerating authors and net publishers. There are many obstacles in the way. But it is worth emphasising the ultimate vision. Consortium purchasing of electronic journals – as complementary to hard copy subscriptions – is but a halfway stage.

How far in this will there be scope for libraries in separate local authorities, and in separate universities, to decide locally on the level of provision on offer to their client base? How far will the Rotherham authority be able to prevent residents of Doncaster, or indeed of Carmarthen, from enjoying access to their website? Will the residents of Essex and of Sutton continue to benefit from a splendid well resourced information source as compared to their neighbours? Similar arguments will arise in the academic world. There is the potential in these new services for national and/or regional organisations to play a quite different and much enhanced role than they do at present.

Questions of economies of scale and the need for high level commercial transactions are going to raise quite new political and economic issues. The Regional agenda proposed by this government has powerful overtones when it comes to Information Provision in the new order of things. Libraries exist principally to acquire and provide intellectual matter where it makes economic and social sense to do this

on a collective basis rather than by individuals acquiring it personally. How far in the future this will be appropriate at the local level to which we are accustomed is open to question in a big way.

Meanwhile, whether it fits the technical definition of research or not, there is scope for forward looking study of these issues – preferably on an international scale. Unless, that is, this summer sees the advent of a really comfy e-Book or TV keyboard to divert us once more!

Insofar as the remaining articles in this number reflect the promise and potential of the younger generation – which they do – they give cause for much optimism for the future. Aileen Wade's forthright review of her experience on the Group's research training course is particularly welcome and should encourage your committee to persevere with this initiative. Juliet Eve – as the youngest Committee member – has contributed her thoughts on an important website. More in this vein would be welcome. *LIRN* could become a valuable 'niche' for reviews of, or responses to, (i) important journal articles and (ii) important websites. Readers get out your pens please!

The articles by Nicholas Lewis and by Jonathan Back are based on their prize winning dissertations but score high for topicality. Susan Copeland continues with an important initiative to make more of student work through modern dissemination. Anyone who makes the time, and can organise the opportunity – neither is easy – cannot fail to be impressed by the interest and quality of research that characterises the best output of our LIS students. There is a lot of it: much is highly topical; and our LIS Schools may be unintentionally hiding this under a bushel.

The quality of student research, and of much practitioner research, deserves recognition – just as the results cry out for more effective publicity and dissemination. The Internet should help – but time needs to be found to make it happen. More on this next time!

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<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199900/cmselect/cmcomeds/241/24102.htm>