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## News & Views

### 'HOW WAS IT FOR ME? THE RESEARCH SCENE AS SEEN FROM LISU'

*David Spiller*

Impossible to resist John Sumsion's invitation - as I retired from the Director post of the Library and Information Statistics Unit (LISU) in September - to reflect upon the LIS research scene. Sadly, I cannot emulate John's magisterial ruminations in his LIRN editorials. (He is not to edit this comment out.)

On starting work at LISU in 1996, I had been out of the country, and out of LIS, for three years. {*David's career started in public libraries and developed with the British Council in the UK and overseas: he headed the Council's Libraries Division and his achievements earned him an OBE - Ed.*} As I laboured to get a grip on LIS research, my first impression was just how much remained to be done - despite decades of work. It was a surprise to find that relatively little basic mapping had been done outside the public and university library sectors; and that little of real value was known about key services such as enquiries or reservations. Soon a BLRIC (as it then was) Call reminded us how little we knew about the *impact* of LIS - this at a time when 'advocacy' was becoming an important new word in my vocabulary.

From the outset I was at least clear about one thing: LIS (and LISU) research is for *practitioners* in libraries and information centres, particularly managers. It is to help practitioners improve the interface between what users want by way of information, and what is 'out there' in the incoherent information world. This focus on practitioners is a guiding principle essential to LISU's continued good health. Of course, other groups use LISU services and buy LISU publications - government, the media, the supply sector, *and* the research community - but practitioners will not provide researchers with worthwhile data unless they believe this will ultimately help them to reach better management decisions.

Living overseas makes you think more clearly about your own country. In developing countries it was common for libraries to be established - as 'a good thing' - but to become almost detached from their institutions, as neither managers nor librarians knew what to do with them. Even in the UK, libraries can become separated from core concerns - school libraries from supporting the curriculum, public libraries from corporate objectives, and so on. Good LIS managers get into the act early to direct their efforts pertinently and to advocate (that word again) their value. This is where the paraphernalia of management information, benchmarking and user surveys swing into action.

Overseas, 'benchmarking' was a piece of jargon used by surveyors. Back in the UK, I found it was an industry - in libraries, as in many other fields. LISU now has two big databases - of public and higher education library data - which permit individual libraries to benchmark their services against others. Even practitioners with serious doubts (which I share) about using management consultants might concede that trying to benchmark their own services without outside help makes no sense. A partnership is needed between the practitioner, diagnosing areas of service that need investigating, and a statistician, making optimum use of a comprehensive database. I think anyone who has examined a number of such investigations will be convinced of their value. They provide a powerful tool for managers who want to know what they are doing right, and wrong. Some managers are still sceptical, but this is partly due to the difficulties of marketing a service when the individual findings have to remain confidential.

Just as confidential, in most cases, is what happens after benchmarking. It would be really helpful to know more from practitioners about management decisions taken as a result of benchmarking or, for that matter, any other kind of research. Reports from the real world provide a feedback loop to focus further research funding. When a research line is found to be 'academic', or not applied, further research funding should surely be curtailed. (Do we need any *more* surveys signalling the under-provision of books for undergraduates?)

A big advantage of being at LISU is the facility for doing research across all the LIS sectors. This is hard to do if you are based in one of them. To an outsider, the introspection within sectors is both striking and limiting. There are also bizarre imbalances in the amounts of research done across sectors – compare the remorseless flow on HE libraries with that on schools (or even the FE sector). We badly need - I write here with all the rabid enthusiasm of a late convert - more teaching/learning-centred research which heeds the independent voices of school librarians. If it were followed by management action from school heads, this would have a bigger impact than any other LIS research upon the quality of life in the UK.

Finding out the latest that is known about any theme is difficult for full-time researchers, let alone practitioners. LISU has made a small contribution by summarising the recent findings of public library surveys in two volumes of *Perspectives*. The Library and Information Commission has been investigating a Web gateway for LIS research. This could be enormously helpful, but only if it is tautly designed and implemented, and grows by absorption and not accretion. A white elephant would not fit the bill.

Two sources of research are especially difficult to unearth. First, practitioners produce many valuable findings which can be used or built upon by other practitioners, if only they are brought to light. Secondly, postgraduate dissertations are a major resource, neglected in two senses: their findings are rarely discovered or used; and practitioners can make more use of the mechanism to help research local problems.

I make no apologies for concentrating, in these reflections, upon practitioners. Their involvement in the research process is the only guarantee of continued opportunities for all of the research community. And after all, practitioners have nothing else to do with their time.

Two final, personal observations. Non-LIS colleagues in LISU have often commented on how 'nice' or 'helpful' LIS practitioners are. We LIS people take the atmosphere of co-operation (rather than competition) for granted, but it is a major plus for conducting research. Secondly, my former LISU colleagues are the most extraordinarily committed

bunch of professionals I have ever worked with. Under their new Director, Eric Davies, they are at your service.

**DAVID SPILLER**

E-mail: [barspiller@aol.com](mailto:barspiller@aol.com)

## TOPICAL ISSUES

*Ros Cotton*

### Getting out of our boxes

...is the main thing we LIS professionals are required to do if we want to take an active role in "knowledge management" according to a wide variety of experts in the field and particularly the authors of TFPL/LIC funded Skills for Knowledge Management (summary at [www.lic.gov.uk](http://www.lic.gov.uk)). This has to be the best ever disseminated set of LIS research findings – every journal I have recently read has had a different article, tailored to its particular audience, by TFPL's Angela Abell and Nigel Oxbrow, so good for them, LIC and the journals' editors for managing this. Naturally, the mainstream LIS ones are more optimistic about the role of the LIS professional than those written for other audiences. However, one of the main problems, it seems, underlying the well-documented trend of KM jobs going to non-LIS people, is failure to get out of our comparatively narrow boxes to fully understand the nature of the organisation's business: the first of 13 KM Enabling Skills is "business process identification and analysis".

I think the *Business Information Review* article (Vol 16, No 3, September 1999) is the clearest, having a useful abstract and summary, besides many clear statements which rather lay it on the line, eg "knowledge management is already losing its capital letters\*..." "KM is here to stay. . . it is a major business improvement model" . . . " . . . the LIS profession appears to have had little impact on KM organisations". This is clearly because KM needs a "breed of 'can do' people, who relate more to opportunities than functions" - and this does not fit common perceptions of the average LIS professional? Let us hope that, now the gauntlet has been so unequivocally flung down, we as a

profession can pick it up wholesale rather than in just one or two isolated cases.

### Metamorphosis for Challenge Fund

This jointly-funded Wolfson Foundation and Department for Culture, Media and Sport creature will now be changing its focus from developing ICT, reference collections and buildings for public libraries to concentrating, with the help of £3 million, on promoting the enjoyment of reading. The DCMS contribution (£2 million) will be used for reader development whereas the Wolfson part (£1 million) will "support projects providing books and materials relating to history from the 18th century to the present day".

By the time *LIRN* readers see this it will no longer be news, but it does prompt a sceptic to ponder the efficacy of plugging public libraries through this kind of funding, which mostly benefits authorities which have cracked the project proposal game. Meanwhile, all around us we see evidence of extreme neglect in our public libraries.

The DCMS tells us that "visiting the library is the FIFTH (sic) most popular pastime in the UK, after visiting the pub, eating in a restaurant, driving for pleasure and eating in a fast food restaurant, but what about watching the telly, especially sport and soaps? I would have expected this to feature more prominently than eating out...

It seems to me that only certain "flagship" public libraries will fulfil their potential as all-singing, all-dancing centres of reading, Internet access and symbols of social inclusion. The majority will increasingly fall by the wayside, swept aside by the Freeserves, Amazons and OnDigitals of this world, which are available 24 hours a day, rather than the too frequently measly hours dictated by numerous local authorities.

At the risk of accusations of heresy and negativity, I believe there is more of an element of King Canuteism here: it is highly likely that public libraries will never be able to compete with these other powerful media unless they can be brought under central control and made to open longer hours. But what about local democracy, I hear some cry? In practice this is often non-existent anyway: you may have the opportunity to vote in local

elections, but when the council stays the same colour for years and libraries are subjected to the dictates of elected members, there is no real say for local people.

For the rosy-coloured view go to <http://www.culture.gov.uk>

### Joined up government spreads to Europe

There has been much use recently of this ghastly prefix (i.e. "joined up") and on reading the small print it often seems that the description amounts to less than the promise. Time will tell, as is the case with all European projects, which by their very nature are destined to be catalysts for wider action rather than complete solutions. The Exploiting Europe's public sector information" strand of the INFO2000 programme selected E3Net from its pool of submissions and this aims to develop a "network for automatic exchange of information produced by European governments' economic and financial services". Concentrating in the first instance on business creation and consumer protection information within project participants France, Spain and the UK, a web site collating this data promises to deliver a "multilingual one-stop shop to the European economic and financial world".

The important thing is its intended contribution to developing European competitiveness through assistance to SMEs and the intention is to extend the work to other types of information and Member States. Perhaps in years to come someone will carry out a study to establish which, of the many initiatives aimed at improving competitiveness, actually bore fruit!

More details from the French coordinators: [anne-marie.courage@dpa.finances.gouv.fr](mailto:anne-marie.courage@dpa.finances.gouv.fr)

### Virtual lifestyle data bonus

Computer systems of some considerable sophistication are being linguistically challenged by a new set of buzzwords emanating from the fast developing e-commerce world – my PC will not allow me to start a sentence or heading with a lower case e, as in e-communities, e-socialising. The well-known market research company MORI has a new sub-division, e-MORI, to cover its research in IT and new media, which has already produced a number of useful looking publications. Its e-panel

uses on-line interviewing and claims to be the only regular survey of Internet users which guarantees representative samples of British users, offers tailored samples of sub-groups eg women over 45, and offers lifestyle data on such things as hobbies and interests, workplace and mobility, besides the usual demographics.

Since e-commerce is now such a hot topic this data could be very useful: see [www.e-mori.com](http://www.e-mori.com) for further information.

### Students turn the tables on "wired universities"

Recent years have seen much browbeating in academia, as institutions compete like mad with each other to maintain the student intake on which their funding depends and potential students go through various mills to gain admittance to the learning seat of their choice. However, according to the latest state of play in the States, students are now choosing universities rather than the other way round, and doing this on the basis of their computing facilities. It seems the students are tuning into a league table of US most "wired" institutions (<http://www.zdnet.com/yil/content/college/>), which covers PC availability (eg in cafes, dorms, lecture halls and "public spaces"). No mention of libraries but one assumes they do have them there and what about loos (sorry, bathrooms)?!

It is thought that this trend will come across the pond fairly soon; so could it be time for university PR machines to soft peddle on course details, social facilities, etc in favour of the profligacy of wires?

### Spotlight on decisionmaking

A recent issue of *Managing Information* (thanks, Aslib) carried an interesting article about a new report by the American company Informix, about styles of decisionmaking. This could have far reaching implications and insights for those really into teamwork, especially those working with non-UK colleagues. Gratifyingly, and this could surely be useful ammunition for information specialists, the report concludes that there is a strong link between poor information, stress and poor decisionmaking, but it also highlights a decisionmaking continuum ranging from intuitive to heavily evidence-based. No great surprise here, we

may think, but styles were then given specific names, eg Gambler, Builder, Juror, Scientist, with individuals typically combining two of these eg Scientist-Builder (common in the States) and Scientist-Juror (UK).

This is interesting in itself but could be illuminating in all sorts of circumstances of professional and personal life, for example in carrying out research projects particularly where participants from different countries are involved. Self-analysis techniques can be gleaned from <http://www.informix.com>

### HTML moving onto the backburner?

Perhaps it will not be long before HTML will look obsolete, as XML (extensible markup language) gains the ascendancy in the text processing technology hierarchy. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), which is responsible for XML, have announced a third phase of its development, which, amongst other things, will continue the work of the second-phase group looking at providing flexible query facilities to extract real and virtual data from the Web. The news item in *CORDIS Focus* (No. 135) contains some useful definitions for XML (low level syntax developed to represent structured data which can be used to support a wide variety of applications) and W3C (an international industry consortium jointly run by the MIT Laboratory for Computer Science in the US, the National Institute for Research in Computer Science and Control in France, and Keio University in Japan with the purpose of developing protocols promoting the evolution of the Internet and ensuring its interoperability).

Shame about the lack of UK involvement – perhaps Tony Blair will put that right as part his push on e-commerce and the competitiveness of UK plc... <http://www.w3.org/XML/Activity>

ROS COTTON

E-mail: [Ros.Cotton@mail.bl.uk](mailto:Ros.Cotton@mail.bl.uk)