
Editorial

Well, in library and information matters, the millennium seems to be going out in a blaze of activity. As if taming the web with metadata and consortium purchasing of electronic goodies were not sufficient, we now have a double or treble set of mergers in our national UK organisations. First the research arm of the British Library joining the Library & Information Commission and then that Commission joining up with museums and archives. I say "double or treble" because there is the added dimension of devolved power and responsibility to the regions - with the prospect that regional initiatives may be even more significant in future than the national bodies. Add to this the merger talks between the two professional associations - and the Higher Education Funding Councils and JISC appear to be in a position of enviable stability with some continuity of achievement!

Other significant omens are the appointment of Chris Batt to get public library networking into the action phase and signs that the Arts & Humanities Research Board is now funding some important LIS research.

Should all this change be welcomed? And what are the pointers for research in our field?

For years the Library Association and others complained that the four LISCs were limited to an advisory role with poor resource and little influence. By small steps previous governments began to be more proactive in public library matters. But many of us argued hard for a body with real funding resources, i.e. power. Now, after several first phases, that is what we are to have. A firm and effective structure should soon be in place. Most significant in the skeleton Design Group Report for the Museums, Libraries & Archives Council (MLAC) is the strong recommendation that funding be a principal feature of its activity. *"It will be essential that MLAC should have a funding role, and the opportunity to operate challenge funding initiatives across the sector. MLAC will also be best placed to continue funding regional bodies in its sector such as the AMCs. . . . The next stage of planning should include the preparation of a business plan setting out MLAC's own funding*

requirements and the implications of different levels of support to the sector." (§ 50, 51)

There are typically British complications in that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are in varying degrees independent of the centralised arrangements. But, in practice, boards in the English regions are going to be more powerful and influential. So, optimistically, we are looking for the best of both worlds: heavy weight leadership and funding from the centre supplemented by some extra diversity and experiment in the countries and regions. One sign that this is already happening is the proposal in Wales for a public library link with each of the new Welsh Parliament constituencies.

Would that one could be equally optimistic about the prospects for collaboration between LIS in the public sector and LIS in Education! - and between LIS in public libraries, 'business and other one stop shops', and what Health Service LIS have to offer the general public. Perhaps collaboration will be more possible at regional level than it seems to be in Whitehall. We need more specific proposals here and to clock up practical achievements. It is not easy: but, if we cannot work inter sectorally, what hope do we have of working with other disciplines?

What does all this mean for research? Pointers to the answers, and some fresh terminological thinking, are in Peter Brophy's absolutely splendid Annual Lecture - which is fully reported below and will repay reading several times over. He sees the need for LIS researchers to broaden their interests into adjacent fields - particularly Education. Overseas links, and knowledge of overseas research, are underplayed at present. Concentrate on the integration and exploitation of digital networks - even more than on the infrastructure - where there is the opportunity for LIS people to take the lead both in academic institutions and in local government. Away with the inferiority complex!

In another context recently the point was made that research in the UK tends to be small scale and parochially distributed - in contrast, for instance, to practice in the USA and in France. Digital library innovations, electronic publishing, and associated topics cry out for large scale development. Unless we first 'think big' about the future we are unlikely to get 'funded big'. I for one would like to see the pages of future numbers of *LIRN* bursting with

informed speculation about the LIS scene we can envisage for ourselves and for our users in 2010 and in 2020.

Several of the contributions to this number bear on these generalities. Rob Davies' letter, along with some hard hitting questions, suggests there is scope for team projects employing academic researchers, commercial research consultants, LIS practitioners and others. He identifies some obvious obstacles in the path of such a desirable outcome: there also tend to be practical logistical problems to do with academic timetables and the flux of research staff in most university departments. Comments and reaction are expected!

Angela McCormick gives her personal reaction to the bureaucratic and other pressures in conducting practitioner led research. Many of these concerns are covered in the Group's Research Courses, now up and running, which are fully described in Philip Payne's Chair's Report.

The other articles are all the fruit of the Group's prize competitions - ranging from the very practical and detailed project to save time and cost at Huddersfield University Library to more 'academic' studies of automatically produced abstracts and of Information Audit procedures.

The Huddersfield project struck some chords with me personally. What we have here is an objective and quantitative study of some stages in the Acquisition process in order to improve efficiency. The project was successful and is being followed with more investigations of the same sort. The essence of such work is the recording of present practice and a critical examination of alternative methods - the paperwork nowadays referred to as Process Charting.

Now the Team at Huddersfield say they could find hardly anything in the literature to show them the way. This is no doubt true in the application of such procedures to the steps of Classification and Subject Indexing. (Indeed it has long been a hobby horse of mine that the profession or trade has made huge productivity gains over recent decades through the central provision of catalogue records with hardly any publicity for the achievement!) But the methodologies of Work Study, Method Study and Organisation & Methods ('O & M') have been

around for so long in the world of manufacturing industry and production engineering that they have all had to be freshened up with new terminology! I spent several years practising them in the 1950s. They are of obvious applicability to the more mechanistic processes of LIS. Are librarians so inward looking that standard methodologies from engineering are "out of scope"?

The question is relevant, although as a relatively trivial example, to Peter Brophy's plea for more outward looking research. As well as the fields of Education, IT, and Sociology there may be scope to explore operating and research methodologies in the worlds of Engineering and Accounting. But perhaps the mention of 'Accounting' is the cue to leave finance and money as research topics for another occasion!

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